A PATTERN FOR MONSTERS—Today's Fiction—Tomorrow's Fact?

fantastic

SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE

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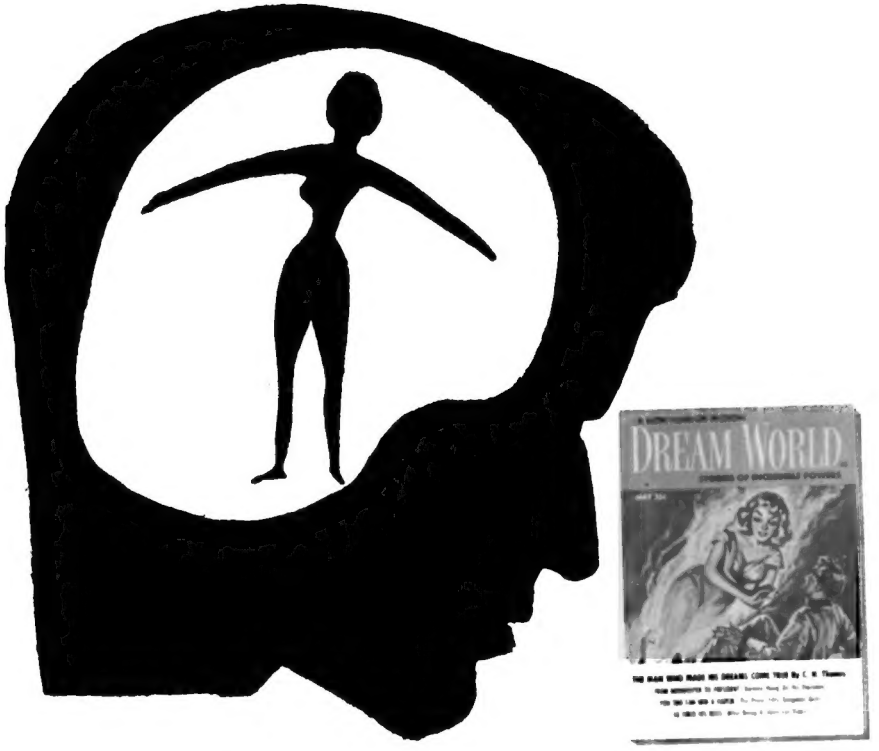

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BY THE EDITOR

Good News Dept.

Hollywood reads *Fantastic* and its big-brother mag, *Amazing Stories*. Last week a sharp-eyed producer bought "Bottle Baby" (April '57 *Fantastic*) for a movie to be titled "The Girl From 2000 A.D." A month ago another unit bought "The Cosmic Frame" (May '53 *Amazing Stories*) the picture to be called "Invasion of the Saucer Men." Conclusion: Hollywood likes our stories—not our titles.

Higher Education Dept.

Paul Steiner, in his "Amazing But True" column (March '57 *Amazing Stories*) mentioned a delicacy called a marigold sandwich. This by courtesy of John Wagner & Son, a Philadelphia spice company that makes a hobby of rare recipes. The item came to the attention of Harvard University and *Amazing Stories* is now required reading in their botany classes. At least that's the story relayed to us by Mr. Steiner. With Harvard plant experts on the job you may soon be able to plant a packet of seeds in your backyard and harvest a crop of marigold sandwiches.

Lost Articles Dept.

A new Ziff-Davis book hits the stands in June—*Amazing Science Fiction Novels*. A complete, full-length s-f thriller titled "20 Million Miles To Earth" which you'll also be able to see at your neighborhood theater. Columbia Pictures will release it in mid-summer and you won't want to miss it.

But what we want to tell you about here is the cover. Naturally, every magazine has to have a cover, so we took dozens of Columbia's stills from the picture and found one that was a cover natural—the towering beast from Venus that ravages

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A PATTERN FOR MONSTERS

By RANDALL GARRETT

The authorities denied every ugly rumor—called their iron censorship a routine matter—protested that the fire was nothing more than a routine tragedy. But the telephoto lens told a different story.

BRADLEY STEVENS scowled at the smoke pouring from the upper floors of the Larchmont Nursing home. He was a reporter and his press card was supposed to get him past fire lines, the rank of police officers that kept the crowd from getting too close to a blaze.

But not this time. The cops had taken one look at Stevens' press card and given him a flat *No.*

And that was the sort of thing Brad Stevens didn't like. He'd climbed out of bed at two in the morning to cover the blaze, and now it looked as though he wasn't going

Was it an accidental

double exposure or something far more sinister?

to get any kind of story at all.

Parker, the photographer for American Press, approached through the crowd of onlookers.

"Brad," he growled, "the cops won't let me take pictures. They won't even allow the TV boys to set up their cameras."

Parker was a thin, wiry man with thinning, graying hair. He was a top-flight operator with a camera—any kind, and he had a nose for news that always led him to the right place for a good shot.

Brad Stevens thought a minute. "There's something damned funny going on here. Why no cameras? Why no reporters, no TV?"

Parker shrugged. "Beats me. It's just a nursing home, not an atomics plant."

The Larchmont Nursing Home was surrounded by a high storm fence and topped with barbed wire twenty feet up. The building itself stood in the middle of about an acre of ground, and was surrounded by grass and shrubbery.

"Biggest blaze I've seen in ten years," Brad said.

Parker nodded. "Yeah. Ever since they brought out those new automatic fire robots in—when was it? '61? —there hasn't been much chance of a blaze like this getting started."

Brad Stevens turned his back to the blazing building. The nursing home was surrounded by a middle-class residential neighborhood on Long Island, just a few miles from Queens.

"Parker!" Brad said suddenly, turning to the photographer, "I've got an idea! Have you got a telephoto lens for that camera of yours?"

"A couple of 'em," said Parker. "A 152 mm and a 300 mm. Why?"

Brad pointed. "See that house up on that little hill there? If we could get that guy to let us use his second floor window, we might be able to get some shots after all."

Parker grinned his ugly, good-natured grin. "I think you've got something there! I'll try it. You want to come along?"

Brad shook his head. "Nope; I'll stick closer to the fire just in case something comes up."

"Right." Parker took off in an easy lope toward the house Brad had indicated.

Brad Stevens made his way through the crowd to the police lines again.

The area was a sea of

sound. There were the excited conversations of the onlookers, which acted as a background against the roar of pumping machines and the hellish crackle of the flames.

The barrel-chested sergeant of police who had stopped Stevens before was again blocking his path.

"I told you, Stevens; you can't go in."

"I know. But I can watch from here." He paused, then asked: "Look—*why* can't the press get in? What's going on in there?"

The cop shrugged. "Stevens, I honestly don't know. All I know is that I've got orders to keep everybody out, and that includes everybody."

"Whose orders?"

"The captain's, naturally. And don't ask me who gave *him* the orders because I don't know."

There was another wail of sirens as two ambulances went through the firelines and up to the open gate of the storm fence surrounding the Larchmont Home.

Brad toyed with the idea of getting in by hiding in an ambulance, but discarded it when he saw a cop at the gate stop the machines and search the inside for unauthorized passengers.

What in the hell is going on? he thought. There was no logical reason why such precautions should be taken. At least he couldn't think of any. But there *must* be a reason, and it was going to be up to Brad Stevens to find out what it was.

He could see the ambulances were taking several people out of the building, but in the flickering light from the flame, he couldn't make out any details.

He shrugged. There wasn't much he could do but keep his eyes open and perhaps do a little snooping on his own.

Within half an hour, the fire was out. There was smoke and steam still drifting from the windows, but the danger of fire was over. And still Brad had found out nothing.

The police sergeant was keeping his eye on everyone, especially the reporters. Brad had talked a little to the man from United Press and a team from *Life,* but no one knew any more than Brad did.

When the smoke from the burned building had become mere wisps of gray, the sergeant suddenly called out: "Hey! Stevens! The rest of you guys! The captain says it's all right for you to go in

there now—but don't go inside the building!"

They went in, but they didn't find out much. The firemen weren't talking, and the Fire Captain just said that the blaze had apparently begun on the top floor. The automatic fire robots were presumably out of order.

"Nothing much, really," the Fire Captain said. "Not mysterious. There's nobody dead, and only a few seriously injured. They'll be all right at the hospital."

And that was that. To most questions, the Fire Captain "didn't know." His ignorance was appalling.

"Why'd you keep out the press?" he was asked.

"Orders. Didn't want anyone hurt."

That sounded fishy, and the U.P. man said so. The Fire Captain shrugged.

Brad looked the building over. It looked perfectly ordinary—a brick building of four stories, the top two of which were gutted black by the fire. The first two floors were wet and smoke-filled, but as far as Brad could see through the windows, they were otherwise unharmed. The basement was about half full of water from the firemen's hoses.

Parker came up, carrying his camera. Brad noticed that there were no telescopic lenses in sight. Parker motioned Brad away from the others.

"I got some shots," he whispered. "Can't tell yet how good they'll be, but I shot up plenty of film."

Brad nodded. "You'd better take a few pictures from here, too. Then let's scram. We're not getting anything out of the Fire Captain, so there's no point in wasting our time."

"Good enough," said Parker as he unlimbered his camera. "I'm ready to go home."

The AmPress helicopter was parked in a lot a few blocks from the fire. A police copter had made them land well away from the burning building.

"Where are we headed?" Parker asked as the whirling blades lifted the vehicle from the ground.

"I'm going to drop you off at the AmPress Building; I want you to get those pics developed. I'm going to find out what hospital the people in that nursing home were taken to. If I can interview them, I might be able to get a break. If anyone knows anything, they should."

The copter rose to two thousand feet and headed toward Manhattan.

There were a few other helicopters in the air, but not many. The Air Transportation Act of 1963 had forbidden private helicopters over cities; only official vehicles and press copters were allowed freedom of the air. The average man-in-the-street was just that—in the street. And there he stayed. Too many aircraft over the city simply wasn't safe for anyone; an aerial traffic-jam could kill thousands.

Brad settled the copter on the roof of the AmPress Building on West Sixtieth Street. The two men climbed out and took the elevator down to the offices of American Press.

Parker went into the developing lab and slid his negatives into the autoprinter while Brad Stevens went to his desk. The night editor called across the room: "Did you cover that fire okay, Brad? What's the story?"

"I'm not finished with it yet. It may be something or nothing—I don't know."

The night editor nodded and went back to his own work. He knew Brad Stevens, and he knew the big, dark-haired man could be trusted to follow up his stories and judge them for himself.

Brad sat down in his chair, which protested somewhat at being forced to support a two-hundred pound body that was built like that of a heavyweight boxer. Brad did some checking with a map and a phone book and dialed a number.

When the TV plate on the phone cleared, a middle-aged woman wearing a white nurse's cap smiled out at him.

"St. James' Hospital, sir," she said in a pleasant voice. "What can I do for you?"

Brad identified himself and then asked: "I'd like to know how the patients from the Larchmont Nursing Home are getting along."

She looked puzzled, but she said: "One moment, sir; I'll look."

She glanced away from the screen, obviously looking at the file of patients. She went through it carefully and then shook her head. "We have no transfers here from Larchmont."

"I'm not talking about transfers," Brad told her. "The Larchmont burned about an hour ago; these would be emergency patients."

Her face cleared and she

shook her head. "No, sir. We haven't had but two emergencies all night, and they were automobile cases. It must be some other hospital that they were taken to."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, sir; I've been on duty since midnight." Her voice sounded a trifle offended, as though she wasn't used to having her word doubted. "You might try Gardenview or St. Mary-of-Lourdes."

Brad nodded. "I will. Thank you very much, miss." He hung up, and the woman's face vanished from the screen. He sat for a moment, his face puzzled.

Now that's peculiar, he thought. St. James' was the closest hospital; surely the victims of the fire would be taken there, and not somewhere farther away. He began dialing again.

Fifteen minutes later, he was genuinely puzzled. No hospital in the area knew anything about the Larchmont victims. Well, there was one other way. The ambulances which had made the pickups were all from the same firm, the Steadmann Emergency Service. It had been painted on the sides of the ambulances.

He reached for the City Directory.

There was no such company listed.

Knowing that a big news story was about to break usually made Brad Stevens tingle with excitement; it was like electrical currents running through his nerves. But not this time. For some reason, all he could feel was a chill in the small of his back. An uncomfortable feeling.

He used the phone twice more, once to call Information to find out if Steadmann Emergency Service was listed—it wasn't—and once to the Centre Street Station, where he asked for an old friend of his, Inspector Costello.

Costello was a lean-faced man with sun-browned skin and startlingly blue eyes. He had an easy grin, but his eyes always seemed to be probing, digging for information to send to the calculating brain behind them. He liked to remark occasionally that his father was an Irish *Cos*tello and his mother was an Italian Cos*tello*, and he'd inherited the best traits of both of them. Brad agreed with him.

"What'll it be, Brad?" he asked when his face came on the screen.

"Have you got anything on

that Larchmont Nursing Home fire this morning?"

Al Costello lifted his brows. "No. Where is the place?"

Brad told him. The inspector frowned a little. "Yeah. That's out where the Long Island Power Station is. Why? What's the matter?"

"They wouldn't let newsmen anywhere near it," Brad said. "But the funny part is this: the people who were hurt in the fire were carted away by ambulances from the Steadmann Emergency Service. Now, there's no such service listed anywhere in Greater New York. Not only that, but those patients have not turned up in any hospital in the area."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Check it yourself," Brad told him.

"Now, wait a minute," the inspector said, holding up a hand, "that's out of my jurisdiction. Why don't you talk to the cops out there? Maybe they'll help you."

"They wouldn't give me any information. I tried. The men on the fire line wouldn't give me the time of day, and I doubt that their superiors would. They don't know me; you do."

Costello thought a moment. "Well, I might take a look," he said at last. "Won't do any harm to try."

"Thanks a lot, Al," Brad said. "Call me later, huh?"

"Sure. So long."

After he had cut off, Brad leaned back in his chair, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it. Nothing made any sense. There was a pattern here, he was sure, but none of it seemed to fit together. The important piece, the keystone of the whole puzzle, was missing.

"Hey, Brad! Come here a minute!" It was Parker, calling from the developing lab.

Brad exhaled a cloud of blue-gray smoke, lifted his muscular bulk from the chair and walked to the lab.

"I got some good shots," Parker said laconically, waving a hand toward the table. At least fifty photographs were spread over it, freshly warm from the autoprinter.

"Some of 'em are pretty good," Parker went on. "This one—remember when that window blew? Caught it. And this— And this—" He tapped several of the prints. "I think we've got enough to make a good spectacular."

"Yeah. But we don't have enough copy to make a good story," Brad said bitterly.

"Yeah. Say, here's a funny

one." Parker picked up one of the photographs. "This is when they were loading the patients into the ambulances. Most of 'em were covered with sheets, but this guy was delirious from pain, I guess. He's pushed the sheet back. And look." He held it out for Brad's inspection. "I must've got two people in at a funny camera angle—but don't it look as though that guy had two heads?"

Brad was staring at the photo. "Yeah," he said very slowly, "it does. It looks *exactly* like he had two heads."

It was after five in the morning when Brad finally got back to bed. He was so weary that, in spite of the queer problem running around in his head, he dropped off in a very few minutes after climbing into bed.

And at five forty-five, the telephone rang.

Groggily, Brad reached over and switched on the instrument.

It was Inspector Costello. "Brad, about this Larchmont thing. It's out of my jurisdiction, as I said. I've got other things to do." Costello's voice sounded strained, almost jerky, as though he were saying something he didn't want to say—but had to.

"Well," Brad said evenly. "It's not out of my jurisdiction. A newsman doesn't have any. I just thought you could help."

"Brad . . ." There was a pause as though Costello were trying to frame his words exactly. "Brad, take my advice. Forget it."

"I can't forget it—you know that."

"*I* can," Costello said. "I hope you will."

And he hung up.

This time, Brad Stevens didn't get back to sleep so easily.

When Brad returned to his desk that afternoon after five fitful hours of sleep, there were two photofacsimiles from Peoria, Illinois on his desk. The one on top said:

"Peoria, Ill. 12 July (AmPress) In an unusual accident here today, a failure in the electronic control system of the Chicago-Mexico City Throughway threw an ambulance off the edge of the highway, killing the driver. The witnesses reported that a man in the rear of the ambulance ran away from the scene of the accident. No other information is available yet."

The second one said:

"Peoria, Ill. 12 July (AmPress) Police report on am-

bulance accident. The driver's name was William Corby, 26, of Chicago. Ambulance belonged to Steadmann Emergency Service, Chicago.

"Earlier report on someone seen leaving ambulance is false. Delete from story."

Brad grabbed the phone and put through a fast call to the American Press office in Peoria.

"Sam," he said to the editor who answered, "who covered that story on the ambulance accident?"

"Fritz Norse, why?"

"Let me talk to him, will you?"

"Sure."

There was a pause, and a young man's face appeared on the screen.

"Hi, Brad; how's the Great Metropolis?"

"I'm beginning to think it's gone nuts," Brad said. "Look, did you check on the ownership of that ambulance?"

"Sure. It's in the police files. I called up Steadmann's to check on whether there was anyone else in the car. They said the driver left Chi with an empty wagon."

"What about this passenger who was supposed to have run away?"

Fritz Norse laughed. "That was funny. It turns out that a couple of scared kids saw the wreck. People on the Throughway couldn't stop, of course.

"So, anyway, these two kids claimed that it was a giant, fourteen feet high that got out of the ambulance and ran into the words." He laughed again. "Nobody else saw any such thing, of course. The kids were either scared by the accident or were telling a tall one to get their names in the papers."

"Maybe they were just exaggerating," Brad said.

"Huh?"

"Maybe he was only twelve feet tall."

After he had finished his call to Peoria, Brad lit a cigarette and stared at his desktop for a long time.

Whatever was going on, it didn't smell right. The Steadmann company was registered in Chicago. What was it doing in a small Long Island town? If there's a fire in Long Island, you don't call Chicago for ambulances—not if you expect them on time. But the funny thing was that they *had* been there—and on time, too.

And where were the mysterious patients? If they were badly hurt, they'd have to be taken to a hospital, wouldn't they? Maybe not. But if not,

then where *would* they be taken?

And what kind of patients were they? First a blurry picture of a two-headed man, and then confused reports of a fourteen-foot giant.

They all fit together, somehow. But how?

One thing Brad knew; he'd have to find out. He couldn't let something like this go without doing anything. His news sense wouldn't let him.

He decided to take the copter back out to Long Island.

As he flew, he wondered about Inspector Costello. What could have made him back out so fast? And the other police—the ones on Long Island—why had they been so reticent?

If it was such a big secret, how could it be let out to so many? The firemen surely must know. If he could get one of them alone, maybe he could induce the guy to talk.

He settled the machine in the copter lot near the police station of the little town and headed for the fire station.

There was a big hook-and-ladder rig parked outside, and a uniformed fireman was sitting on its running board, just waiting for something to happen and lazily soaking in the warmth of the July sun. He looked as though he were in his late forties or early fifties.

"Quite a fire last night," Brad said as he neared the man.

The fireman looked up and grinned. "So I hear. Must've been a real beaut. I'm glad I wasn't there, frankly."

"Off duty, eh?" Brad tried to keep the conversation easy and friendly. He didn't want the fireman to think he was prying; the guy might clam up fast.

"Oh, no," said the fireman, "I was asleep upstairs. But we never even got the alarm."

Brad tried to keep the surprise out of his voice. "You didn't? Then who put out the fire?"

"That was the Power Station's special squad. The man who runs the Larchmont must've called them by mistake. They went anyway, because they're closer. It's all right by me; I get my salary anyway."

"Is that usual around here?" Brad asked. "I mean does that squad normally put out public fires?"

The fireman shook his head. "Matter of fact, it's never happened before. Wouldn't have happened this time, except that the guy at

the nursing home called the wrong number, he was so excited. That'll happen, I guess.

"Usually, the Power Station squad just puts out fires around the station."

"I see." Brad exchanged a little more light conversation with the fireman and then strolled off. There was nothing more to be learned there.

He went to an automatic news vendor on a nearby corner and fed it coins. It hummed for a second, then began feeding out a freshly-printed photofac. Brad looked through it for references to last night's fire.

It was there, a tiny squib that merely stated that the nursing home had burned, that no one was killed, and only a few injured—none seriously.

Funny—the Fire Captain had said that only a few were hurt seriously, the newspaper said none. Brad began to wonder if perhaps someone had died in the blaze and it was being successfully covered up.

He wadded up the paper and dropped it into a corner disposal chute. For a moment, he stood there indecisively; then he hailed a passing cab.

"Long Island Power Station," he said.

The huge Atomic Power Reactor that serviced all of Long Island and Greater New York didn't look very impressive from the main gate of the steel fence that surrounded it. There were several brick buildings, many of them windowless, that were scattered in a seemingly haphazard manner around the square mile of area. The central building itself was a low, blocky affair with broad, high windows.

The guard at the gate looked at Brad's identification and said: "I'll have to check." He made calls on the phone and finally reached the Assistant Director. He explained that there was a newsman here to write about the plant.

The guard listened for a moment, then said: "Yes, sir. Yes, he's right here. Okay." He handed the phone to Brad. "The Assistant Director wants to talk to you."

Brad took the instrument—an old-fashioned job without a viewscreen. "Hello, this is Bradley Stevens of American Press."

"Hello, Mr. Stevens. This is George Merriwell; I'm the Assistant Director. What can I do for you?"

"I'm writing up a little series of articles," Brad said half-truthfully. "You

know the sort of thing—what is being done here, what a great job everyone is doing—that sort of thing."

"I see. I think that's excellent, Mr. Stevens. Could I meet you, say, for dinner?"

"Fine," said Brad. "I'd like to take a look around the plant, too—you know, see how the thing works and all."

"I'm afraid that would be impossible at the moment, Mr. Stevens," said Merriwell. "There has been some trouble in Section Seven; one of the insulation fields has become a little leaky, and we don't want to endanger anyone's life or health. We expect to have it repaired by the end of the week, however, if you'd care to come by then."

Brad hesitated. What could he say? "Very well, then, Mr. Merriwell; I'll come back when it's more convenient. Thanks."

He handed the phone back to the guard.

Brad flew back to the city with the sense of having been beating his head against a stone wall—and then having the stone wall turn out to be murky fog that yielded before him and still showed nothing. And the more he thought about it, the less he knew. What should he do next?

He reached out and grabbed the copter's phone, at the same time heeling the machine over to change direction. He dialed.

"General Editor, American Press," said a voice.

"Boss, this is Stevens. I've got a hot lead on a story. Check with Parker. I'm taking a plane to Chicago. You want to have some one wire me a check? Yeah."

He gave the General Editor all the details, then hung up as the copter headed for LaGuardia Airfield.

The Steadmann Emergency Service was one link in the chain that could still be looked over. Brad arrived in Chicago after most businesses had closed, but, having eaten on the plane, he decided to look up Steadmann's.

He found the address in the phone book. It wasn't actually in Chicago, but up in the little suburb of Evanston. Brad got in a robotaxi, dialed the taxiport nearest to the address, and leaned back to wait while the electronic brain that controlled the cab sped him through the streets of Chicago.

He decided he'd walk from the taxiport to the Steadmann establishment. He wanted to do a little scouting

before he just walked in and started asking questions.

Chicago and environs was hot and damp, even though the sun was hovering near the horizon. It had probably been blistering earlier in the afternoon. A faint breeze seemed to be springing up from the lake, but it was too weak to do much to dissipate the heat.

Brad found the address. It was a smallish building that looked like a garage. There was no way of identifying it, because there was no sign in front. It looked deserted, which was odd for an ambulance service.

The newsman walked on by the place, circled the block and took a look down the alley. There didn't seem to be any activity in the rear. He walked down the alley toward the rear entrance. It was closed, but inside he could hear sounds of hammering. There was a short passageway between the Steadmann garage and the business next door. Brad walked down it, toward the fire escape that went up the side of the next building.

The fire escape was one of those old-fashioned jobs with a counterweighted lower ladder that swings down if someone steps on it, but swings up out of the way when not being used so that, theoretically, at least, no one could climb up it from the alley.

The trouble is that the things are remarkably easy to gimmick if a man knows how. One way is with a long piece of rope. Unfortunately, Brad wasn't carrying any rope, and there didn't seem to be any conveniently laying around. There did, however, happen to be a few heavy bricks piled up in one corner of the passageway. Brad decided to use method number two. It was a little noisier, but he'd have to take that chance.

He pulled off his light coat and put in a few of the bricks. They weren't the cleanest bricks Brad had ever seen, but the synthetic fiber of the coat would brush clean afterwards, and the tough fabric would stand plenty of abuse.

Tying the bricks into the coat by knotting the sleeves was the work of a moment. Then, judging the distance carefully, Brad swung the bundle with the practiced ease of an expert hammer-thrower. It arced into the air, just barely cleared the horizontal section of the ladder,

and landed on the end step with a faint *clunk*!

It was just enough weight to barely tip the balance. Slowly, the end of the ladder swung downward. It stopped about nine feet off the ground. Brad jumped up, grabbed it, and brought it down the rest of the way.

He was grateful that the thing didn't squeak. Some of the really ancient iron fire escapes became so rusty with disuse that they sounded like a banshee with a stomach ache if someone tried to use them. But these aluminum alloy ladders were quiet and smooth.

He picked up his brick-and-coat bundle and ran quickly to the top of the stairway. There, he undid the bundle, put the bricks on the roof, dusted off his coat, shook the wrinkles out, and put it on, all the while surveying the roof of the building next door.

The passageway was only four feet wide. The jump could be made easily. But would a jump alarm those in the building? Not necessarily. Not if he landed right on the brick edge of the roof, where the wall would be rigid enough not to give a loud thump. It would take tricky timing, though.

He stepped back from the edge of the roof, took three quick steps and launched himself into space. He landed easily on the edge of the next roof.

He stepped carefully on the roof and walked quietly over to the door that led down into the building. It came open softly when he turned the knob.

Everything was dark below; the sun had set, and the faint afterglow wasn't enough to penetrate the darkness within.

From downstairs, he could hear the faint rumble of voices and the echoing din of hammers and other tools being used.

Walking cautiously, Brad started down the stairs.

Something crashed thunderously against the back of his skull, and the darkness increased ten thousand fold.

When he came to, he wasn't quite sure where he was for a minute. His head felt properly crushed, but probing with his fingers told him there was nothing but a bump. The rest of his body had bruises here and there; he'd probably fallen down the stairs after being slugged.

He was lying on the floor of an empty room. Through

a window came the faint glow of a street light.

Brad picked himself up, wincing as the movement shot pain through his head.

There wasn't a sound to be heard.

A glance through the window oriented him; he was in a room somewhere in the front of the Steadmann Emergency Service garage.

Cautiously, he pushed open the door. The door opened into a huge room that had grease and oil spots on its floor. It had quite obviously been used as a garage; there was room for several automobiles.

But now it was as empty as a church on Monday.

He decided to investigate, half hoping he would find somebody to punch in the face for slugging him.

There was no one in the building. All three floors were empty. There was no furniture, no equipment of any kind, not even a phone; the building showed no sign of having been occupied for months.

And yet he knew there had been several men in the place; there must have been to make all that noise.

And then a faint noise broke the silence. Someone was opening the front door!

Running on his toes, his soft shoes making hardly any sound on the concrete floor, he went to the door and stationed himself behind it.

It opened slowly, and a shadowy figure entered the room.

With the fluid motion of a panther, Brad launched himself at the figure's back and brought the edge of his right hand down on his opponent's neck with a hard rabbit punch. He pulled the punch just a little; he wanted a knockout, not a broken neck.

The shadowy figure said: *"Uhh!"* and dropped to the floor.

The door swung open a little farther, and the street lamp's fluorescent glow streamed over the figure.

"I'll be doubly damned," Brad said softly.

The figure was that of a girl.

Bradley Stevens had never clobbered a girl before in his life, and he hadn't intended to start now, but he wasn't going to cry about it after it was over.

He knelt down and examined the girl. She was breathing evenly. A neck punch shocks nerves, but it doesn't do much permanent damage unless the cervix is fractured.

Brad pushed the door shut and lit his cigarette lighter. He set it on the floor and opened the purse the young woman was carrying.

The first thing he came across was a gun—a small but very deadly .300 Magnum. He dropped it into his coat pocket and opened the wallet the girl was carrying.

According to the badge and identification card inside, she worked for a California detective agency—the Consolidated Investigation Corporation of Los Angeles. A private cop!

The girl moaned a little, shook her head groggily, opened her eyes, and closed them again. When she opened them once more, she said: "What the devil did you hit me with?"

"This," he said, holding up his hand.

She moved her neck around, trying to get the stiffness out. "Well," she said after a moment, "I suppose you'll want to get me on a burglary charge. Frankly, I doubt if you could make it stick."

Brad grinned. "I doubt it, too, since I could probably be grabbed on the same charge myself."

She sat up. "Who are you?"

"Maybe I should ask you the same question," he returned.

"Maybe. But you're no fool; I can see that. You've already gone through my purse." She glanced at his coat. "You've probably got my gun in your pocket."

"Suppose you tell me who you are, anyway," Brad said evenly.

She sighed. "Lenora Douglas, investigator for the Consolidated Agency of Los Angeles. Now, who are you?"

"Bradley Stevens, of the American Press."

"Stevens?" Her eyes opened wider. "I've read your stuff. You're a good newsman. I used to watch you on TV. Sure—I thought the face was familiar."

"It's too damned familiar," Brad said. "There are times when I wish nobody had ever heard of me."

"You must be on something hot," she said. "I wonder if we're looking for the same thing."

"Might be. Let's go get some coffee and talk it over. There's nothing here."

He showed her through the building to convince her that they had come up against a dead end for a while at least.

Then they headed down the street to the taxiport.

Over the coffee cups, Brad outlined part of what he'd found. He didn't tell her anything about the photograph Parker had taken, and he didn't mention the Peoria kid's story about the giant.

After he was through, the girl nodded. "It tallies. My client—I can't tell you who it is, of course, or reveal anything confidential, but I'm free to tell a little. Anyway, my client had an aunt in his house; he was taking care of her, and she became suddenly worse. He called an ambulance. It picked her up, and she was never seen again.

"We were asked to investigate, and I've traced the outfit to here."

Brad nodded. "That fits," he said.

"How?"

"The same way all the other stuff fits," he said. "Because it's senseless; it doesn't mean anything."

"I see what you mean." She thought for a moment, then said: "Look here; suppose someone is picking up sick people — kidnapping them for—well—experimental purposes. Wouldn't that account for it?"

Brad mulled the hypothesis over in his mind. "It might," he said after a few moments, "but it'd have to be a big operation. There's an awful lot of cover-up, and it's spread all over. One case in New York, one here in Chi, and one in L. A."

"I didn't say my client was from L. A.," she reminded him. "I'm not at liberty to—"

"—disclose that information," Brad finished for her. "Yeah, I know. But look here; why didn't he go to the police and say she'd been kidnapped?"

"He did. They investigated. This guy couldn't even prove he had an aunt. The police found no evidence of any crime. They dropped the case."

"Oh, *brother*!" Brad moaned. "As Alice said: 'Curiouser and curiouser.' The more information we get, the less we have to hold on to. About all we can do is find out what we can about the Steadmann Emergency Service. Right now, that's the only lead we've got."

She nodded her agreement. "I'll tell you what. You're working on a news story. I'll tell you anything I find out that pertains to that story. But we'll leave my client out of it—okay?"

"Fair enough," said Brad. "Nora — Lenora — which do they call you?"

"Nora," she said.

"Nora, has anyone ever told you you're beautiful?"

"Many times," she said. "I'm almost convinced. And while we're on the subject, let's get one thing straight. I like men in general, and I might learn to like you in particular. I like dancing and parties, and I'm not averse to a little smooching—but when there's business at hand, I like to keep my mind on business. Clear?"

"Quite clear," Brad told her. "That was a test question. You can find out an awful lot about a girl by the way she answers that old standby: 'Has anyone ever told you you're beautiful?' "

She thought that one over for a minute, then grinned. "Yes, I suppose you can. What does it tell you about me?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might give you a swelled head. Now let's figure out where we go from here."

Nothing much could be done that evening, they agreed; the best thing to do was get a little sleep and make a stab at tracing down the mysterious Steadmann the first thing in the morning. They checked into separate rooms in the Hilton. Brad took a couple of aspirins for his throbbing head and a couple of sleeping tablets. He felt as though he hadn't slept for a week.

At eight the next morning, Nora called on the phone. Her face looked clear and bright on the visiscreen, but she smiled when she saw him.

"You look as though you'd had a fight with an egg-beater."

"I feel like it."

"How's the head?"

"A little tender in back, but otherwise okay. Look, I'll meet you in the coffee shop in ten minutes. That all right?"

She smiled. "Fine. And comb your hair." Then she cut the circuit.

Brad shaved, bathed, and dressed quickly. As he picked up his coat, it felt strangely heavy. He reached in the pocket, and pulled out the little blue-steel .300 he had taken from Nora's purse. He grinned to himself. The girl had known he had it; she'd said so. And then she'd completely forgotten to ask for it back. He shoved it back in the pocket and went down to the coffee shop.

She was waiting for him at a table across the room,

sitting by the broad window that faced the street.

"You look better," she said, smiling. "Now what?"

"Breakfast first, then conversation," he told her. "I long to gaze into the glistening yellow eyes of a pair of eggs—sunnyside up."

They ate through a quiet stream of small-talk, then, when the coffee came, he said: "All right, let's see what we've got."

"From where do we start?"

He grinned. "First, you hold hands with me under the table."

She frowned. "I thought I told you—"

"This is business," he interrupted. "I took something from your purse last night—remember?"

"Oh!" she looked startled for an instant, then smiled. "I'd forgotten."

She put her hand under the table. He handed her the gun, and she slipped it deftly into her handbag.

"Now we'll take a look at the position we're in. What information do we have?

"One: there's a mysterious fire in a Long Island nursing home. Ambulances run by Steadmann took the patients away, and they're never seen again.

"Two: A Steadmann ambulance somehow has an accident on one of the most foolproof highways in America.

"Three: Steadmann runs out of his headquarters, leaving no trace.

"Four: Your client, whoever he is, has an aunt who is kidnapped by a Steadmann ambulance and is never seen again.

"Five: In every case, the authorities have tried to keep the thing under wraps."

"Except in this last one—we don't know yet," she pointed out.

"That's right; and that's one thing we'll know today."

"How do you figure we ought to tackle it?" she asked.

Brad lit himself a cigarette, belatedly offering one to Nora. She shook her head *no* and waited for him to go on.

"Steadmann had a business here," he told her. "He's registered in the phone book. Or, at least, the name is registered. We actually don't know if there *is* a Steadmann, but we'll have to call him that until we know better.

"The first thing we'll do is look up the old phone directories and see how long he's been here. We'll check with whoever owns that building and find out how long it's

been rented. We'll check his reputation with the Better Business Bureau.

"Now, he hasn't been gone but a few hours. The news won't be around for a few hours more, if we're lucky. We may be able to run our checks before that happens.

"Here's what we do; you check with the police. That badge of yours will get you farther than my press card. You can also check the telephone company.

"I'll check the building owner and the Better Business Bureau. Okay?"

She nodded. "It sounds fair enough to me."

"Good. We'd better get started; we don't want to waste any time."

She rose from the table. "Let's get moving."

"One more thing," he told her. "When we get our information, we'll come back here. And we'll phone in and check with the hotel every hour. Okay?"

"Okay."

Two hours later, Bradley Stevens sat in the lobby of the Hilton, smoking a cigarette quietly and mulling over what he had found. At first, it had seemed even more senseless, but now a dim ray of light seemed to be trying to seep through the fog of confusion.

The Better Business Bureau hadn't had much information on the ex-proprietor of the little building in Evanston. But they had it listed as the Steadmann Emergency *Auto Repair* Service.

On the other hand, the owners of the building, the Chapman Realties Corporation, had rented the building to the Steadmann Emergency *TV Repair* Service.

And in the phone book, it was simply listed as the Steadmann Emergency Service.

Why? Well, it made a kind of wild sense. If someone called for an ambulance, all they had to be told was that they had made a mistake—that this was a TV or an auto repair place.

"Yes, that's right, madam. The phone company didn't get the full name in the book. I'm sorry, madam."

Brad could almost hear the words in his ears.

But if that was the case—*why put the number in the book at all?* They could have had an unlisted number, which could be given out to special people, if they didn't want to give it out to the public.

Damn! Just as he'd think

he was approaching an answer, he'd strike a perfect *non sequitur.*

He glanced at his watch. It was almost time for Nora's call. He lit another cigarette from the stub of the first and went on with his thinking.

Half an hour had passed before he realized, with a start, that the girl's call was long overdue. He got up from the comfortable pneumochair and walked across the lobby to the main desk.

"Have there been any calls for Bradley Stevens?" he asked the clerk.

"Just a moment, sir." The suavely polite young man went to the autotally and punched buttons. He noted the answer that came up on the screen.

"There have been no phone calls, sir," he said, "but I notice that a letter has been sent to your room."

"If any calls come," Brad told him, "have them transferred to my room."

He took the elevator up to the ninth floor and walked down the hall to his room.

There was an envelope in the letter receptacle.

Dear Brad:

I'm sorry to take a run-out on you this way, but my superiors have recalled me to Los Angeles. As far as I've been able to find out, the police have no record of any Steadmann, and the telephone company knows nothing except that they installed an instrument there.

Again, sorry,

Nora

Brad frowned at the note. It sounded all right, but it seemed odd that the whole thing should be typed—including the signature.

He picked up the telephone and called the desk. "Has Miss Lenora Douglas checked out?" he asked.

The polite young man consulted his register. "No, sir, she hasn't."

"Connect me with her room."

After a full minute of ringing, it was obvious that there was going to be no answer.

Three minutes later, he was knocking at her door. There was no answer to that, either.

Ten minutes after that, he had the assistant manager unlocking the door. He had explained who he was, and told him that he was afraid the girl was in trouble. The hotel man seemed to be more

worried about the girl skipping out on her bill.

The door swung open under the assistant manager's hand, and the two men stepped inside. The room was neat; the bed had been made. Brad opened a closet door. Nothing. No one in the bathroom.

Her luggage — a single brown leatherette suitcase— stood by the dresser.

The assistant manager knelt down beside it and opened it. The suitcase was full of flatly-folded, tightly-packed newspapers.

The hotel man stood up with a sigh. "It happens every so often. As long as people have luggage, we don't ask for rent in advance. So, every once in a while, someone comes in with a cheap suitcase full of trash and just leaves it when they're ready to go."

Brad frowned and shook his head slowly. "That suitcase is pretty new; it's worth more than a single night's rent."

The assistant manager looked at the piece of luggage thoughtfully. "You're right. Probably stolen."

"Even so," Brad reasoned, "she could pawn it for a night's rent in a cheaper hotel. She wouldn't pull a trick like this unless she intended to stay here several days."

The hotel man thought that one over. "By George, you may be right! I'll tell you what I'm going to do; I'm not going to rent this room unless I absolutely have to. She may show up later in the day."

Brad didn't agree, but he kept his mouth shut. He pulled open a bureau drawer. Empty. He opened another.

And blinked.

The only thing in the drawer was a blue-steel .300 Magnum pistol.

The assistant manager was kneeling down, closing the suitcase; his eyes were below the level of the drawer. Brad pocketed the weapon with one smooth motion of his hand.

Casually, he closed the drawer and opened the next one.

"Anything in there?" the hotel man asked as he rose to his feet.

"Nothing in there now," Brad said truthfully.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anything missing, at least. Funny what some people will do, isn't it? Do you know that people with plenty of money will steal things they don't need just because

they can get away with it? Why, you know those Bibles—" He pointed at the black-bound book on the night table. "—those Bibles are put in hotel rooms by the Gideon Society, for nothing. And people will steal them; people who wouldn't ever read . . ." The hotel man continued with his lecture as they walked out into the hall. He was obviously a little angry at being taken for a night's rent, even though it was no great loss to the hotel as a whole.

It ain't the money . . . Brad thought sourly.

But Brad's attention was no longer on the man's words; he was thinking of Nora's disappearance. For a moment, he thought of offering to take care of the girl's room rent, but he realized that the hotel was a powerful ally; hotels stick together for their own protection in such cases as these, and they keep their eyes open for skippers. They had long ago discovered that skippers, like other kinds of petty criminals, usually repeat themselves.

A photograph of Nora had automatically been taken when she registered, and she had had to give her thumbprint. The news would go out to other hotels that she was a skipper, and they'd have their eyes open.

If she registered at another hotel, they'd have her.

But Brad suspected it was something worse than just a skip-out. If so, her name would be redeemed eventually.

He felt as though his whole life had suddenly come tumbling down about his ears. It wasn't the girl, exactly; he hadn't known her long enough for that. But his whole concept of life had been that there are *reasons* for things; he believed that events were orderly and meaningful. And now they no longer had any sense to them; they seemed to be isolated events; occurrences almost totally insulated, only vaguely connected.

So many mysteries with only the wispiest of relationship to each other.

". . . had you known the girl?" asked the assistant manager.

Brad jerked his mind back out of its reverie. He had only been half aware that the man was talking.

"How long had I known her?" Brad repeated. "Only since last night; she was a casual acquaintance."

"I see," said the hotel man dryly.

Brad knew what the man was thinking, and he also knew it would be useless to deny it, but he had a faint impulse to smash his fist into the smug face. He suppressed the impulse and felt childishly noble because he had.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Mr. Stevens," the assistant manager said. "We appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have to make a phone call." He headed for his own room.

The call was to the Consolidated Investigation Corporation of Los Angeles, and it took only a few minutes.

The head of the agency himself informed Brad that no such person as a Miss Lenora Douglas was, or ever had been, working for them.

"Look," Brad said, "I saw the girl's badge and identification card."

"Thank you for telling us," said the detective. "They're forgeries, of course. We'll have it investigated. But, you see, we're only licensed to operate in the State of California. We'd never send an operative to Chicago."

"I see," said Brad dully. "Thanks."

"Glad to have been of service. And thank you again."

Brad cut the connection.

Well, what did that mean? Was the girl lying, or was there a coverup going on here, too? Which? But the big question in his mind was not so much *which*, but—

Why? In the name of Heaven why?

The phone rang. Brad flipped it on and watched the pleasantly homely face of Parker fade into view.

"Hi, Brad. Find anything in Chicago?"

Brad shook his head wearily. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Except, maybe negative leads. Whoever or whatever is behind this has thrown stone walls in front of me at every turn. And I can't seem to break any of them down. They lead nowhere.

"I've been conked on the head and I can't even prove assault. I think a girl's been kidnapped, but I have so little evidence that I couldn't take it to the police. I'm not even sure, myself."

Parker said: "Well, maybe I've got a new lead. It looks just screwy enough to be connected."

"Give."

Parker looked down and read from a piece of paper:

"A woman's been arrested for malicious mischief. She called the police and told them that she'd been attacked by a four-armed monster. She said she'd shot and killed it and that it was in her back yard, dead.

"When the cop's got there, there was nothing to be seen. And—get this—she claimed the police had *already* been there to pick up the body!

"They've got her in a psychiatric hospital now, for observation."

Brad slammed his palm down on the table so hard that it made Parker jump. "It fits! My God, *how* it fits!" There was excitement in his eyes. "We may have a better lead here than we've ever had! Where did it happen? There in New York?"

"Los Angeles, California," said Parker. "But why do you say it's a better lead than the others?"

"Because this time we've got an eyewitness that actually saw something, up close —actually shot it!"

"Maybe." Parker looked doubtful. "So far now, all you've really got to go on is a telephoto shot that might be an accident, the eyewitness account of two kids who were a long ways away, and

She had fallen afoul of the monsters.

the word of a woman who's in the twitch-bin. Doesn't sound promising to me."

"Maybe not, but that Los Angeles dateline means something to me."

Parker spread his hands. "Okay; it's your story." He grinned lopsidedly. "Good luck."

"Thanks. So long."

He cut off and started repacking his suitcase. The last thing he put in it was the girl's .300 Magnum.

As he was checking out and asking the clerk about stratoplane reservations for Los Angeles, the assistant manager walked deferentially over to him.

"Oh, Mr. Stevens; I thought you'd like to know that Miss Douglas isn't a skipper at all. We're much relieved, of course; we hate to find ourselves suspecting our guests.

"The bill was paid by telefac money order, with a request that we ship the suitcase. It seems the newspapers were for reference purposes, and—"

"Just a minute," Brad cut him off. "You say the money was wired in by Miss Douglas? From where?"

"Why, from Los Angeles. But not by Miss Douglas; by her employer, the Consolidated Investigation Corporation."

Brad took a full thirty seconds to digest that. He forced himself to keep his voice calm. "I see. I suppose her employer will give her her suitcase."

"Oh, no; that was sent directly to her home." He gave an address on Laurel Canyon.

"Did she leave anything else here?"

The hotel man shrugged. "That's all she asked for." Then his brows drew down and his face became stern. "But, see here, why are you asking so many questions? You admitted that you hardly knew the girl. I told you about the payment because you were kind enough to tell us of her leaving, but—"

"I was just worried that maybe something had happened to her," Brad said engagingly. "I'm happy to hear that she's all right."

The assistant manager's smile returned. "Yes, of course. Well, I hope you enjoyed your stay here, Mr. Stevens. Have a good trip, and do come back!"

Brad said something appropriately banal and beat a hasty path toward the door.

The weather in Los Angeles was its usual beauti-

ful. It was sunshiny, pleasant, and refreshing, like all the other days that march through Southern California with monotonously fine weather.

Brad Stevens stood at the airport after the two-hour ride from Chicago and wondered why anyone ever lived in the vicious weather of New York and Chicago.

It's either too hot or too cold. . . . The words of the newly popular revival sang in his head. *Not in Los Angeles.*

Two hours of relaxation in the smoothly cruising stratoplane had begun to give some pattern to his thoughts. So hectic had this chase been that it was hard to realize that it was only a little more than thirty-six hours since it began. It might make a news story yet, if he could crack it before the Larchmont Nursing Home story got cold.

He half smiled as he thought to himself that the nursing home itself probably wasn't too cold yet.

As he walked through the milling crowds at the airport, he kept trying to sort the various elements of the puzzle in his mind. They began, at times, to make a dim sort of sense, then he'd find another angle that made the whole thing look crazy.

He went over theory after theory, discarding them one after another.

A two-headed man, a giant, and a four-armed monster.

How did they fit in?

He stepped out to the robotaxi line and started to climb in when a voice said: "Are you Bradley Stevens?"

Brad turned to face a pair of ordinary-looking, well-dressed men.

"Yeah, I'm Stevens. Why?"

One of the men held out a card. "Police officers. We'd like to talk to you."

Brad hesitated. If they were real cops, he didn't mind talking to them at all, but he was getting a little cagey about peculiar credentials.

"Mind driving down to the station with us?" the other cop asked.

"I'll take your suitcase," said the first. Any choice the one cop gave him was negated by the other.

Brad realized there was nothing he could do. They both carried guns near their fingertips, while his only armament was the .300 in the suitcase. He had three choices: run, fight, or follow orders.

He handed the cop his suitcase. "Let's go," he said.

They flanked him and the three of them took the escala-

tor to the roof, where a police helicopter waited.

No one said anything as the machine lifted. Brad knew he'd find out soon enough, and he wanted time to think and figure out his strategy—if any was going to be needed.

Several minutes later, he was glad he had not decided to fight or run. The copter settled gently to the roof of the great, new Los Angeles Municipal Building.

"Let's go downstairs," said one of the cops.

Resignedly, Brad did as he was asked.

Brad sat in a chair, holding his head in his hands. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about!" he said, for what seemed the fifty thousandth time in the last two hours.

"Well, we'll try it again," said the First Cop. (Brad had never been told their names; he had long ago simply tagged them as First Cop, Second Cop, and Third Cop.)

"Now, tell us again where you got that gun we found in your suitcase," First Cop went on.

"I told you," Brad said with weary patience, "I got it out of the girl's hotel room."

"Stole it," said Second Cop laconically.

"Drop dead," said Brad.

"I like that," said Third Cop. "That's very witty and very clever and very original. 'Drop dead.' Isn't that witty?"

Brad looked up at him and forced a smile. "I'm glad I'm appreciated by a man whose wit is obviously on a par with my own."

Third Cop flushed. "Look, wiseacre—"

"Now *you* look," Brad said, pointing a finger, "I am flatly not going to answer any more of the same old questions. I've tried to help you guys, and I'm still willing. If you come up with any new ones, ask 'em, but let's knock off the monotony."

"Now, look, Mr. Stevens," said First Cop soothingly. "You're newsman, a well-known newsman. We're just police officers that nobody ever heard of.

"Now, when you have a job to do, you do it—right? Well, that's all we're trying to do—our job. All we ask is that you answer a few questions. Now, if you had a news story to get, why, we'd co-operate to help you. Why don't you help us?"

Brad recognized the old "buddy-buddy" treatment; it

was Standard Operating Procedure with cops.

So far, he had been given almost no information. Lenora Douglas was dead, and the bullet that had killed her had come from the .300 Magnum he had been carrying. She had been found somewhere in Chicago at sometime in the morning. Suspicion had been aroused in the hotel assistant manager's mind, and the call had gone out for Bradley Stevens.

"I have nothing more to say," Brad said flatly.

First Cop sighed. "Okay, lock him up for awhile." He stood up. "We'll talk to him later."

One thing Brad Stevens could say for the hospitality of the Los Angeles police: the jail cells were comfortable. He leaned back on the bunk and went over his story again.

He'd told them when he'd arrived in Chicago. He had told them about his trip to Evanston to see Steadmann "on a news story." He had told them that he'd met Miss Douglas there, without mentioning the fact that they'd both been inside the building.

He'd told them about checking into the hotel, and how they had had breakfast together. And he'd told them that that was the last he'd seen of her.

And they'd kept saying: "Look, Stevens, you're lying. We know it, and you know it. Now, come on and tell the truth."

Police officials co-operated with each other a lot more than they had in the old days. They had to. A man could get from one state to another too easily.

Years ago, if a killing happened in Chicago and the suspect was in California, the Chicago police would have to extradite the suspect before they could question him.

He still had to be extradited for trial, of course, but the local police were given all the facts by telefacsimile, and they could question the subject and relay the information back to Chicago. Sometimes, suspects were questioned by television, but a TV screen doesn't have the psychological effect of a ring of living policemen.

Brad closed his eyes, suddenly feeling about ninety-nine years old. It was another gimmick that didn't make sense. The Gang—whoever they were—could kidnap a whole burning hospital full of patients and they'd never be seen again. But they

couldn't get rid of one girl's body. Why?

Did they want to frame Bradley Stevens?

Brad sat up straight and opened his eyes. That must be it! He was getting too close—or at least they thought he was. So they had decided to frame him and . . . Brad let himself slump back.

No, that couldn't be it. If they wanted him out of the way that bad, they'd have killed him in the garage. No fuss, no muss, no bother.

Suppose there were more than one group involved? It was possible, of course; there might be two or three or even more groups involved.

He shook his head. In a deal like this it was best to use Occam's Razor: dig for the simplest solution. He'd have to go on the assumption that there was only one group, with the possibility of a second group in the background.

But why all the cover-up? Something like this would have to be really big in order to get so many people to clam up about it.

And what were they up to, anyway? Kidnapping on a grand scale, obviously. And murder. But what was the motive? How about profits? A big organization like that wouldn't be working for peanuts.

The door to the cell-block clanged, and the guard brought in a fat, seedy-looking man wearing a blue textron suit. His head was thinly covered with meager strands of gray hair, and his brown eyes glittered with extra brightness caused by contact lenses.

Brad jumped to his feet. "Lew! Thank heaven you got here!"

Lew Bronson was one of the finest criminal lawyers in the State of California. He didn't say a word until he had been locked in Brad's cell and the guard had left.

The first thing he said when he sat down was: "Brad Stevens, you know better than to lie to your lawyer. Now, did you kill that woman, or not?"

"I didn't kill her, Lew."

"All right, then; what happened?"

Brad went over the story again—right from the start. This time, he didn't leave out a single detail. He included the photo of the two-headed man, the giant, and the story of the four-armed man. He included the little *tête-à-tête* in the Steadmann garage. He missed nothing.

Brad was no fool. When you talk to a lawyer, it is as stupid to lie or omit facts as it is to lie about your symptoms to your doctor.

Lew Bronson listened in silence while he lovingly filled a briar pipe with expensive tobacco and carefully puffed it alight. His head was entirely enveloped in smoke by the time Brad finished.

He puffed in silence for a few more minutes, then said: "If we ever have to tell that story to a jury, they'll think we're pleading insanity—both of us.

"Now, look, I haven't been able to get all the dope on the Chicago situation, but it looks something like this:

"The girl was found just a few hours ago, in a room in one of the less expensive hotels. She'd been shot three times with a .300 Magnum pistol, and the markings on the bullet check with the gun you were carrying.

"She'd been robbed and stripped of identification, but since all private detectives are registered with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, they soon had her identified.

"The desk clerk at the hotel swears that the person who checked into that room was a man; the signature on the book is 'Richard Williams,' probably a phony.

"The trouble is that these cheap hotels don't have any autoidentification system, so there's nothing to go on.

"The cops checked with all the other hotels, and found that you and the girl had checked in at the Hilton the previous evening, so they did a little questioning and found out about your investigation of her room.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if you hadn't picked up that gun. When the police here found it on you, they knew they had something more than just a routine questioning on their hands. If you'd left that .300 where it was, you'd be in the clear by now."

Brad nodded, saying nothing.

"One other thing," the fat little lawyer said, "they gave your hands a nitrate test after they found the gun, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Have you fired a gun in the past forty-eight hours?"

Brad laughed sharply. "I haven't fired a gun in the past forty-eight months."

"Good. You're clear on that, then. Of course, there are ways to remove that evidence, but the average man

doesn't know that. At least it's a piece of evidence they *don't* have.

"What I'm going to do is get you out of here as soon as possible. I've already applied for a writ of *habeus corpus*, and I think—"

The cell-block door clanged again, and the guard let First Cop in. He came over to the cell, and Lew Bronson said: "I'm talking to my client, Sergeant Webley."

First Cop said: "That's all right, Mr. Bronson; you can talk to him outside. We're releasing him."

Bronson frowned. Brad knew that the *habeus corpus* writ hadn't come through yet; something like that took a little time.

"May I ask why this sudden realization of my client's innocence?" Bronson asked.

First Cop shrugged with one shoulder. "Sure. We checked on Mr. Stevens' movements, and he's got an alibi.

"The autopsy report on the girl came in, and it shows that she was killed late yesterday afternoon—before Mr. Stevens ever arrived in Chicago."

Twenty minutes later, Brad Stevens and Lew Bronson were seated in a quiet bar over a pair of Scotch-and-waters. They had left the Municipal Building as rapidly as possible, without asking any more questions.

"They're looking for your girl friend now, of course," said Bronson. "If she had Lenora Douglas' papers, it's likely that she was mixed up in the killing."

Brad Stevens shook his head. "It sounds fishy, Lew. If she's an operative for Consolidated, why did they deny knowing anything about her?

"Why did they send for her suitcase and *not* the gun? Why was the gun left in the room, anyway? Did the gun belong to the real Lenora Douglas or to the murderer?"

Bronson took a sip of his drink before answering. "I don't know. The police aren't letting out any information."

"By the way, what about that Laurel Canyon address that the suitcase was sent to?" Brad asked. "The police must have gotten that from the hotel's assistant manager."

"I don't know," admitted Bronson. "Want me to check on it?" Without waiting for an answer, he got up and went to the pay phone over by the bar.

The call took about five minutes. When Lew Bronson

came back, he said: "That's that. There's no such address."

"What about the check that was mailed to the Hilton to pay for her room?"

Lew Bronson snorted. "That's easy. Anyone can go down to Western Union and send a telefac check under any name he wants to. As long as the money's paid in, they don't care who gives it to them. All they have to worry about is making sure the right person collects it."

"Damn!" said Brad. "I'd give a purty to know more about that check. Which office here in L. A. was it sent from? Did a man or a woman send it?"

"What makes you think it was a man? It looks to me as though the girl you met—whoever she was—knocked off the Douglas dame and then came here to L. A. to send the telefac."

"Yeah? What about the mysterious 'Richard Williams'? What's he got to do with it? I wish this thing made more sense." He finished his drink and lit a cigarette.

"Look here," he went on, "if the girl—call her Nora—killed Miss Douglas, why didn't she leave then? There would have been nothing to connect her with the killing; it would have been blamed on Williams. Instead, she sticks around, carrying the murder weapon, and using the dead woman's identification. She even checks into a hotel using it. That doesn't make much sense."

"No," said Bronson, "it doesn't."

For several minutes, neither of them said a word. Then Brad said: "Look, there are a few things that connect up. There are weird monsters in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Then, we have Steadmann's in New York and Chicago. Ambulances and monsters. How do they connect?"

"What about that nursing home?" Bronson asked.

Brad nodded. "That's what I was coming to. Are there any private nursing homes in Chicago or in Los Angeles that are surrounded by high storm fencing?"

Bronson sighed gustily. "Several of them, I'd say. That's the usual procedure for 'nursing homes' that take care of mentally disturbed patients."

"Agreed. But I've got another tie-in. I'm not sure how it fits, but let's take a look at it.

"It was the private fire-fighting equipment of the Long Island Power Station that put out the fire in New York. When you come right down to it, that's more than just a little damned peculiar. The story about its being an accidental wrong number didn't sound right to me then, and it still doesn't.

"Now, there are five big nuclear power reactors in the United States, supplying eighty percent of the nation's power. Now where are the three biggest?"

Bronson exhaled pipesmoke slowly as he spoke. "New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. That's a queer tieup."

"Not too queer. Look, suppose someone wanted to take over the United States. If they could get control of our power system, they'd have us over a barrel, wouldn't they?"

"Sure, sure," Bronson agreed. "But how are they going to do that? The U. S. Government knows that better than we do; those plants are well protected." He paused. "Besides, what country could pull off a *coup* like that? And how could they keep all the higher-ups clammed up?"

The newsman considered just exactly how he was going to put this. Finally he said: "Well, this sounds nutty, I know, but let's just try it for size and see what happens."

"Shoot," said the lawyer.

"Suppose we were being invaded by aliens from Mars or Venus or someplace like that. That would account for the monsters, wouldn't it?"

Bronson considered it. "It might. But it sounds pretty far-fetched. How do they go around getting all this co-operation from the higher-ups?"

"I don't know. Maybe they have hypnotic telepathy or something." He slammed his fist into his hand in a gesture of self-annoyance. "Oh, I know it sounds like something out of a kid's TV program, but then so does the rest of this set-up."

"Agreed," said the lawyer. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Keep investigating. What else can I do?"

"The police will still have a tail on you, you know," Bronson warned.

"Don't worry about that; I can ditch any tail they've got."

"Okay," the lawyer said. "If you get in another jam, just yell."

"Don't worry; I will. You can count on it."

At first, Brad made no attempt to get rid of the police officer he was sure was following him. He never looked around, or acted as though he suspected he was being followed; to do so would have made them harder to escape from when the time came.

He checked into a big hotel in downtown Los Angeles after buying a big map of the city and several magazines at a local bookstore. He had no intention of reading the magazines; they were simply to cover up the fact that he had gone in for only the map.

Once in his hotel room, he spread the map out on the floor and then opened the telephone book. First, he located the Southern California Power Station. Then, with his pencil, he began marking off the locations of the various hospitals and private nursing homes near the big reactor.

The Station itself was located near San Pedro, the harbor that connects Greater Los Angeles with the Pacific Ocean. Vast quantities of water are needed for the operation of a really high-powered atomic reactor, and all five of the Power Stations were located near big bodies of water.

There was only one private nursing home that actually filled the bill. It was located less than a mile from the area covered by the Power Station itself.

Just for the sake of curiosity, he looked up the Steadmann Emergency Service in the directory. It wasn't listed, but near it was a Steel Emergency Service.

He looked in the Yellow Pages, under "Ambulances," "Auto Repair," and "TV Repair." The Steel Emergency Service wasn't listed under any of them.

On a hunch, he called the number.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the operator, "that number has been disconnected."

The address for the Steel place was near that of the nursing home — Leadville Nursing Home.

That cinches it, Brad thought to himself. *The connection is there somewhere!*

The next step, then was to check the Leadville Nursing Home.

And to do that, he'd have to elude the gentleman from the L. A. P. D. He'd wait until nightfall.

He took the express subway to San Pedro as the first

step. Once there, he started walking toward old Fort MacArthur, as though he had a definite appointment with a definite person. After a few blocks, he turned and headed directly toward the waterfront.

It was just as he'd remembered it. There were several small boats — little tramp deisels—tied up against the dock. Most of them were less than forty feet long. He walked along as though he were looking for the name of the boat he was searching for. Actually, he was looking for a craft that was comparatively unguarded.

He finally found one. There was a lamp lit in the cabin, but the two men inside were playing cards and drinking beer; they weren't watching the deck. Why should they? There wasn't much aboard to steal.

Just as though he owned the craft, Brad Stevens walked up the gangway. As he turned, he could see a figure behind him out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't pause.

He walked quietly to the other side of the little ship, eased himself over the side until he was hanging by his hands. He let go and slid silently into the water.

He made his way silently through the water, sticking close to the sides of the anchored vessels. Once, as he passed between two of them, he saw a man watching the boat which he had boarded. He kept on moving.

Finally, when he was several hundred feet away, the curve of the dock had taken him out of sight of whoever was watching. He climbed up to the pier and took a look around. No one was in sight. Good. He started walking again. He hoped the cop kept a good eye on the innocent ship.

By the time he reached the Leadville Nursing Home, the warm evening air had completely dried his textron suit, leaving only a residue of salt which could easily be shaken out.

From a block away, it was obvious that the Leadville place was quite similar to the Larchmont. And it was also obvious that there wasn't a light on in the building.

He walked up to the main gate. It was padlocked, and a sign read: CLOSED

Well, that left only one thing to do. He'd have to take a look at the Southern California Power Plant itself.

At a distance, it was ob-

vious that he wouldn't be able to sneak up on the Power Plant. The area was well-lighted, and the double storm fence around it was probably electrified and loaded with alarms.

He spent forty-five minutes walking around the place, looking for some sort of loophole that he could get through. There were none.

The only way to get into the Power Station was through the gates, and every one of them was watched by a pair of armed guards, one inside, one outside. He got up as close to the main gate as possible and tried to figure out a way to get into the inclosure, but it looked hopeless.

He was still wondering when he heard the sound of an automobile purring inside the compound. He looked at the road. A car was coming toward the plant.

No. Not a car. An ambulance.

And lettered neatly on the side were the words:

STEEL EMERGENCY
SERVICE

It pulled up to the gate, and the guard went around to the rear and looked inside. Evidently they didn't want anyone getting into the Power Station in that manner.

"How many more loads?" asked the guard.

"Three more," said the driver. "Got to hurry; the *Oremus* sails at midnight."

The gate swung open, and the ambulance went on in. The guard pushed the gate closed after it.

Brad Stevens thought a moment, then made a decision. If he couldn't get into the Southern California Power Plant, maybe he could get onto the *Oremus*.

He'd never heard of the ship before, but he knew several things about it. It would be fairly large, but not a regular passenger liner. And it wouldn't be in any of the small docks.

He looked at his watch. He had just under two hours to find her and get aboard and get off again.

The *Oremus* turned out to be a good-sized and fairly modern cargo vessel, probably not atomic powered, since the ban on using atomic power for seagoing vessels had come into effect before this ship was built.

Brad stayed well out of sight, looking for a way to get aboard her.

The loading ramp was out

—flatly. It was brightly lit and there were several men working around her—two of them wearing uniforms and guns.

The *Oremus* was certainly ready to go. She floated low in the water, as though she were fully loaded, and a small remote-controlled tugboat was visible nearby, ready to pull her out to sea.

Brad wished he'd had time to check up on the sailing notices—and then reflected that they'd probably contain false information, anyway. He was rapidly reaching the point where he couldn't believe anything but the evidence of his own senses.

Was there any other way aboard besides the loading ramp?

Well, he might be able to climb the anchor chain, but the thought didn't appeal to him much.

There was one other way. The roof of the loading shed was about twenty feet higher than the deck of the *Oremus*. If he could get on top of the shed—

He'd have to chance it. He *had* to know what was aboard that ship! And *who*!

The piers themselves were paired off: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and so on. Actually, each pair was just one long, wide pier; the south side was the odd-numbered pier, the north side was even-numbered. The *Oremus* was in Pier 7. If he could get to the roof of the loading shed of Pier 8, he could make it.

There was no ship tied up to Pier 8; it was dark and unused at the time. Not completely dark, however; the light from Pier 7 reached it a little.

Come on, boy, he told himself, *don't yellow out now.*

Moving cautiously, but rapidly, keeping well in the shadows, he made his way to the loading shed of Pier 8. And all the way, he knew that if one of the men on the other pier were to look his way, he stood a good chance of being seen.

But none of them did.

Getting to the roof was comparatively easy. There were a series of iron handholds going up the side for the convenience of the men who operated the loading machinery on the roof deck.

He hoped there wouldn't be anyone up there on the Pier 7 shed. There shouldn't be, since the *Oremus* was already loaded, but he couldn't be absolutely sure.

Again, he was in luck. The roof of the huge double shed

was empty of life. He walked silently across it, lay flat on his stomach, and peered over the edge at the deck of the *Oremus*.

There were men on the deck; four of them, leaning on the rail, smoking and conversing in low tones. But, as Brad had hoped, they were not directly below him. When a man leans over a ship's rail, he wants to look at the sea or the city, not at the side of a loading shed.

He was in luck in another way. Because of the evident secrecy of this voyage, lights on the ship itself were being kept at a minimum. Only the pier was brightly illuminated.

Brad lifted himself back from the edge of the roof and looked around. There ought to be a rope around somewhere. It required a little hunting, but eventually he found a coil of good, half-inch reinforced line. He secured it around a ring bolt and lowered the other end over the edge of the roof.

"Here comes another one," said a voice from the deck.

Brad froze. Had they seen his rope?

Then he heard the humming turboelectric engine of one of the ambulances. It was pulling up to discharge more of the mysterious cargo—or passengers—into the ship.

The men on deck were all looking at the new arrival now; they wouldn't be looking at the wall of the shed. Now was his chance.

Brad dropped the rest of the line over the edge, hoisted himself over, and slid down the rope.

Quickly, he moved into the comparative safety of the shadows of the superstructure. No one had seen him.

Crouching, he moved around to the stern of the ship.

"Who—who's there?" said a voice in the shadows beneath a lifeboat.

Again Brad froze in his tracks—but only for a moment. He recognized the voice.

It was that of the girl who had called herself Lenora Douglas.

Almost without pause, Brad's mind made its decision.

"It's me, Nora; Brad Stevens."

She gave a little gasp, then suddenly she was running across the deck and was in his arms. "Brad, Brad, I've been so frightened! Please! Get me off this terrible boat!"

He could feel that her face was wet with tears.

"Shh! Be quiet! Get hold of yourself, Nora!"

She breathed heavily for a moment, then she seemed calmer. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I've been sc-scared stiff!"

"I don't blame you," Brad told her. "How did you get here? What happened?"

"I was kidnapped," she said in a low whisper. "I had barely stepped out of the hotel when two men walked up to me and stuck a gun in my ribs—right in broad daylight. There was nothing I could do; I got in their car, something jabbed me in the arm, and that's all I remember until I woke up here—on this ship."

"Where?"

"Down in the hold—in a cabin. They had handcuffed me to a bunk with my own handcuffs, but they didn't know I always carry a spare key pinned to the inside of my dress, right here." She patted the small of her back. Then she looked up at him, puzzled. "Brad, how did you get here?"

Briefly, he told her what had happened to him since he'd last seen her. Then he added: "So, I'd like to know how it was that this woman was killed with your gun."

She shook her head. "That wasn't my gun. I don't know how it got there, but I had my own with me when I was picked up. It was in my purse, along with everything else."

"And why didn't Consolidated admit you were an agent of theirs?"

"They never do," she said. "At least to private individuals. If you'd been a policeman, they'd have identified me."

"Okay," Brad said. "Now what's going on aboard this ship?"

She shivered in his arms. "Oh, Brad! It's horrible! These people, whoever they are, have been kidnapping people and changing them into monsters! Terrible looking creatures with awful faces! Some of them have extra arms and legs and heads and—oh, all kinds of ugly things! Please, Brad, let's get off this boat before they catch us and do it to us!"

"No." Brad's voice was firm, the statement final. "I've got to see these things for myself. I can't leave after getting this far. You're pretty well hidden under that lifeboat where you were. I wouldn't have seen you if you hadn't called out. You get

back under there and stay until I get back."

"But what if you don't get back?" she almost wailed. "How will I get off?"

"If necessary, dive overboard." Brad's voice was almost brutal.

"But I can't swim!"

"Get under there! I'll be back!"

She looked up at him with wide eyes, then nodded her head. Without another word, she returned to her hiding place.

The girl had obviously come up the companionway ladder that led below. Brad went to it and opened the hatch carefully. It was well lighted, but deserted. He knew he was sticking his neck out farther than any giraffe had ever dared, but—

Down he went.

He was walking down one of the companionways toward the bow of the ship when he heard the thud of many feet coming toward him from around the turn ahead. Nearby was a cabin door that stood partially open.

Brad pushed the door open and stepped into the darkness of the cabin, then closed it. There were a series of ventilator slots at eye level in the door. Brad peered through them and saw four men in sailor's uniforms stride down the companionway toward the direction from which he had come. After they passed, Brad drew a deep breath. There was always the chance that they would be coming for the very cabin he was in.

Suddenly, the lights in the cabin went on. From behind him came an odd grunt. Brad whirled. His eyes widened, and his breath was jerked into his lungs in a harsh gasp.

Standing there, with one great hand on the light switch was one of the most shocking things he had ever seen.

It was not an ape; the brow, the braincase was much too large for any ape. Its face had no brow ridges, and the eyes were not set deeply into their sockets.

But the jaws were the great, fanged, bone-crunching jaws of a bull gorilla, and the hair that covered its body was long and shaggy.

The feet were not those of an ape, either. Instead of an opposed great toe, the toes were set like those in a human foot.

The most human thing about it was the fact that it was wearing a pair of white tennis shorts.

And the least human was that awesome face set above hairy shoulders that were all of three feet wide.

All this Brad saw and assimilated in a single, timeless second. Then he spun and was out the door.

Human antagonists he could fight, but the thing in that stateroom was too much for him. He started running up the companionway. Like Nora, his only thought now was to get off this hellish ship.

Perhaps, if he had met the creature in broad daylight, he might have stood his ground. If he had been warned of what he was to meet, he might have faced it bravely.

But there is panic in any man, and the shock of that brutal, inhuman face suddenly confronting him in the narrow confines of what he had assumed to be an unoccupied cabin had completely unnerved Bradley Stevens.

He ran. But not for long. As the first shock ebbed, the panic ebbed with it, and he saw that he was running almost directly into the path of the sailors who had just passed the door of the cabin he had left.

They had heard his running footsteps and turned. They had no time to be puzzled.

Brad had realized what that instant of panic had cost him, but he didn't slow his charge. His brain, although heated for a moment with blazing, unreasoning fear, had suddenly become the cold, logical brain of the seasoned fighter.

His charge carried him directly into the knot of men. One of his big fists slammed into a solar plexus, while the other thudded into the ribs over a man's heart.

The stricken men spun and dropped, getting in their companion's way. And Brad kept on running.

Behind him, he heard shouts. He turned a corner at full speed, and saw ahead of him another group of men.

And these men, having been warned, were ready for him.

In the melee that ensued, it didn't take long for Brad to realize that these men weren't just common sailors, practiced in bar battles and street fights; they were trained, hand-to-hand combat men.

Brad was trained, too, but there were more of them. The only reason it took them as long to get him as it did was because they were obviously

trying hard *not* to kill him.

Brad never did remember feeling the blow. One minute he was there, fighting for his life; the next minute, he was plunged into a sea of nothingness.

There was something cold on his face. He had to think about it for what seemed a long time before he realized that someone was washing his face with a cold, wet washrag.

He opened his eyes, focussed them, and looked around.

He was lying on a bunk in one of the staterooms of the ship. There were several sailors standing around watching him. One of them had been bathing his face with cold water.

On the other bunk, across the cabin, sat a fine-looking silver-haired man in his middle fifties. He was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, looking intently at Brad. There was a half smile on his face.

"How do you feel?" the man asked.

"Like I'd been slugged," Brad admitted. "But that's all right. I'm getting used to sleeping that way in the evening."

The half smile became a smile. "So I understand. You've given us a little trouble, Mr. Stevens."

"I suppose I have. Do I get an explanation for my pains?"

"You might," the man said. "What do you think the answer is?"

"I don't know," Brad admitted, "but seeing your face clears up a lot of things."

"You know me?"

"Sure. I'm a newsman, remember? You're Dr. Edward FitzHugh, Director of the Atomic Research Commission." Brad sat up on the edge of the bed, holding his head in his hands. No one tried to stop him.

"Very well; what have you deduced?" asked FitzHugh.

"This is some sort of hush-hush top secret Government affair. It has something to do with — uh — monsters." He launched into an account of what he had discovered and surmised in the past two days.

"You were keeping these monsters in these phony nursing homes," he went on. "The 'emergency service' ambulances are used to transport them around—I suppose because an ambulance can get to places that an ordinary car couldn't.

"You've got these places set up near all five of the big

atomic power stations. And I'll bet I could spot every one of them."

"You could?" FitzHugh didn't look surprised.

"Sure. It's a code. All the nursing homes start with the letter 'L,' and the emergency service name starts with 'S.' " He paused. "You want certain people to be able to find either one just by looking it up in the phone book."

"Do you know who these certain people are?" the scientist asked.

Brad shook his head and then wished he hadn't. "No," he said. "I was hoping you'd tell me." He winced again and looked up at the sailors. "Boy! You guys can fight!" He rubbed his chin.

"So can you," said one of them, grinning. "You got a couple of our boys before we got you."

"They should be able to fight," FitzHugh said dryly. "Gentlemen, meet Mr. Bradley Stevens of AmPress. Mr. Stevens, meet some of the finest officers in the United States Navy." He didn't bother to mention names. "This is probably the only civilian freighter in the world that has ever been commanded by a full admiral of the U. S. Navy."

"Wow! This would probably have made the greatest story of my career."

"*Would have?*" asked FitzHugh sharply.

"Sure," said Brad. "I won't print it if there's a good reason not to, and I've got a hunch there is."

"I hoped you'd say that. There *is* a good reason."

"Let's hear it," Brad said.

The scientist offered Brad a cigarette and lit one for himself. "You know something about atomic radiations, I believe. You did some articles on it once.

"You know that there is a certain maximum dosage that the human body can take without serious damage to bodily tissues. That's been known for many decades.

"It's also been known that the dosage is cumulative. A lot of little exposures to radiation can be as bad as one massive dose of radiation.

"But it wasn't until about twenty years ago that we began to realize how damaging even very tiny dosages could be if they were allowed to accumulate over a long period of time. Especially if the radiation were directed toward the reproductive organs."

Brad's eyes widened. "I'm beginning to get it now. Mutation."

"Exactly," said FitzHugh. "Mutation of the human germ plasm, with the result that when the offspring were born, they weren't exactly human. The chromosomes and genes were effected; they were changed, with resulting changes in the inheritable characteristics of the children.

"Only those people who worked with really high-energy radiation, such as is used in our modern reactors, have been affected so far. But we still don't know what effect the lower energy radiation will have on the human race if it goes on long enough.

"That's why we took these —these mutations from their parents. Their parents were scientists and technicians who had worked around reactors which were thought to be adequately shielded. They weren't. Only in the past year have we been able to devise the suppressor fields which stop *all* radiation.

"Even so, some damage has been done. Our technicians know about the danger. They know, too, that there is a chance that their children may be born—different.

"That was the reason for the nursing homes. The family of a scientist or technician who worked in one of the power stations or who ever had worked in one was able to call for aid in the event of pregnancy.

"Fortunately, the majority of children born are normal in every way. But it's sometimes difficult to tell when a child is different.

"In spite of what you may think, those poor creatures are not prisoners in the precise sense of the word. Most of them know that they would never be acceptable in the world. The older ones know perfectly well that their germ plasm must not be allowed to contaminate the human race."

"I can see that," Brad said. Then, changing the subject a little, he asked: "What caused that fire in New York?"

The scientist's brows drew down into a frown. "I'm afraid that some of the children—especially the young ones—don't understand why they're being kept segregated from the rest of humanity. One of them tried to burn the place down. Luckily, none of them were badly hurt."

"That, of course, explains why the nursing home called the Power Station fire department. You didn't want ordinary firemen seeing the kids." He paused. "But, wait a min-

ute. The Steadmann Emergency Service was located in Chicago. What were Steadmann ambulances doing on Long Island?"

"They'd been driven in from Chicago the day before, to pick up some of the children from New York. We would have changed the name to Salisbury Emergency Service, but the fire caught us unawares."

"I suppose the highway accident near Peoria was just an accident?" The pieces were rapidly coming together.

FitzHugh nodded. "Just an accident."

"What happened to the giant?"

"He ran into the wood and hid. We picked him up in a helicopter a few hours later."

"And what about the four-armed monster that was shot in Los Angeles?"

"He ran away," Dr. FitzHugh said sadly. "He was only fourteen—wanted to see the world, I suppose. We had a squad of our special police on his trail within ten minutes, but we were too late; he'd already been killed. The special squad covered up by pretending they were the city police. They took the boy away in an ambulance before the city police arrived. The woman's story, of course, was never believed."

"It seems to me that a lot of people must know about this already," Brad said. "Why not give it to the public?"

"Not many people know about it, and those who do won't talk. We have to apply pressure now and then to stop an investigation, but it usually works out well.

"Your friend, Inspector Costello, for instance, doesn't know anything. He was told by his superiors to stop investigation, that's all."

"By the way," Brad said, "you have the girl, don't you? If you don't, she's on deck, under Number Five lifeboat."

"We got her," FitzHugh said. "As soon as we found you aboard, we combed the ship."

"I'm not quite sure I see how she fits into the picture, though," the newsman admitted. "I'm fairly certain she killed the real Lenora Douglas, but I can't see why. And why would she carry the papers around with her?

"Her story was as full of holes as a fishnet; she couldn't even act the part of a female detective. I took her gun away from her, and she forgot I had it. And then she left it in the hotel room.

"She typed out that note, even her signature, but I knew it was from her. Nobody else would know what I had sent her after or know that we were on first name terms. And then tonight she tried to tell me she didn't write it.

"She's not a very good liar. What's the matter with her? Feeble minded?"

"No," said Dr. FitzHugh. "Actually, she's a very brilliant little girl. She just doesn't have enough experience, that's all.

"We have special operatives affiliated with the Consolidated agency. The agency doesn't know anything about this project, but they do know that certain of their employees are Government agents.

"Jeanette—that's her real name—escaped from the Los Angeles nursing home, and we sent Lenora Douglas after her, along with Richard Williams, another of our men.

"They found her, but when Williams went up to Evanston to help clear out the Steadmann group, Jeanette managed to get hold of the gun and in the struggle Lenora was killed."

Brad looked puzzled. "Then this Jeanette is a mutation, too? How?"

"There are other kinds than mere freakish mutations," the scientist told him. "Some of them are extremely hard to detect at first. Jeanette looked perfectly normal when she was born, but after four years, it became obvious that she was different.

"She grew up twice as fast as she should. She looked like an eight-year-old by the time she was four. And she had the high intelligence to keep up with her body growth."

"Good God!" said Brad. "How old is she now?"

"Just over nine years old," said Dr. FitzHugh.

"Then how did she get all that grown-up talk?"

"From books—from listening to adults talk—from everywhere she could pick it up. But she didn't have the perspective of an adult."

Brad silently thanked Heaven that he hadn't tried to make love to her.

"Williams picked her up when she was trying to get away from Chicago and brought her back here," said FitzHugh. "We have to keep her under observation. Perhaps, when she completely matures, the process will stop, but we don't think so. We believe that by the time she's thirty-five she'll look like a seventy-year-old wom-

an. She'll probably die of old age before she's fifty."

To Brad, this was the most horrible nightmare of them all.

FitzHugh said: "Now, I'm afraid you'll have to leave, Mr. Stevens. The ship is ready to sail."

"Where to?"

"I can't tell you that, except that it's an island in the Pacific. We've brought all the mutants with us and closed up shop. No one else need ever know anything about them.

"You're an honest man, Mr. Stevens. We tried to keep you from finding out about this, but since you did, we don't think you'll say anything. We don't want the public to panic; I think you can see that."

"I can see it. There'd be monster lynchings and God only knows what else. No, I won't print it. I'll even destroy that picture Parker has." Then he grinned. "Besides, if I did try to print it, I couldn't prove it; you're taking all the evidence with you. And without evidence, I'd become such a laughing-stock that I'd never be able to get a news job again."

There was a humorous glint in Dr. FitzHugh's eyes. "I think you may be right, Mr. Stevens. That's one reason why we can let you go.

"And by the way, it's because of people like you that we've had to leave the United States. No matter how well a secret is kept hidden by the Government, a newshawk like you can always dig it out, one way or another."

"Thanks for the compliment, Dr. FitzHugh. Good luck."

When he reached the New York office the next morning, Bradley Stevens turned in his report to his editor.

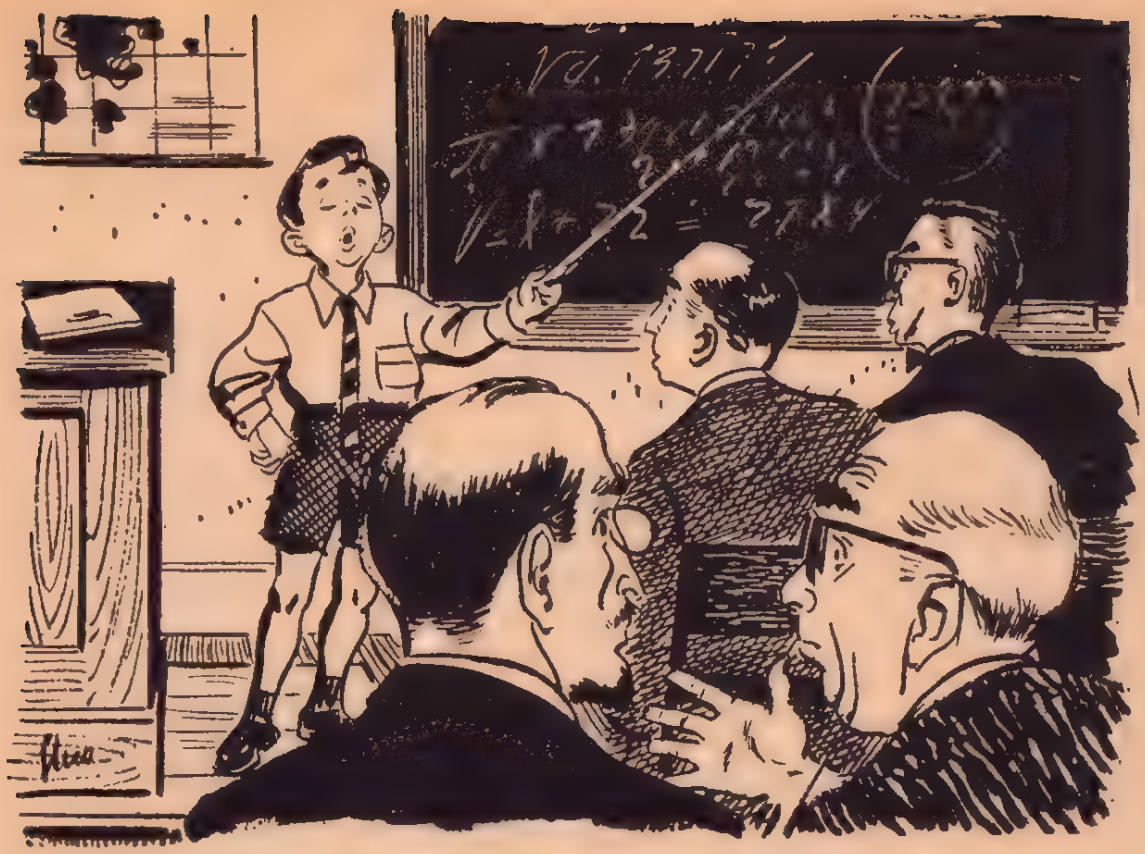
"Wild goose chase," he said. "Nothing to it. Just like those flying saucer stories back in the forties and fifties."

Then he went back to his desk and sat down to look over the latest telefacs.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Say! *What about those flying saucers?*"

THE END



Attic For Rent

Dr. DeLito's motives were of the very best. Help for retarded children is certainly a worthy endeavor. But how was the poor man to know of all the brains lying around waiting to be "discovered?"

By GENEVIEVE HAUGEN

DR. DELITO slyly glanced around the laboratory to see if anyone was observing him while he made the switch. His unsuspecting patient—a mentally retarded six-year-old boy—looked on with incomprehension while the prematurely gray young scientist removed the electroencephalograph which had been measuring the patient's brain waves and substituted a similar-appearing apparatus for his great experiment.

The new device was Dr. DeLito's own invention—a subatomic vibrator. As yet he had tested it only on guinea pigs, and their result-

ant behavior had startled him. They seemed to have acquired almost human reasoning powers, and no longer reacted in the traditional pattern of rodents.

Eager to test his new device on a human subject, he was not willing to wait for the University's permission. They were too cautious and ultra-conservative about such things. Here was a perfect opportunity, because the child in the laboratory chair was incapable of knowing or revealing what was happening. He was one of numerous subjects in a survey to determine the brain wave patterns of sub-normal mentalities as a part of a research project with the aim of developing a cure.

Attaching the wires to the boy's temples, Dr. DeLito turned a dial on the vibrator which established a contraelectromagnetic field. The idea had occurred to him after watching a successful experiment in the creation of contraterrene matter in a nuclear reactor, and he had applied the principle to a simple subatomic generator in inverse ratio to terrene magnetics.

The only indication that his machine was functioning was a faint aura which surrounded the boy.

"How do you feel?" asked the doctor.

"Goo-goo," replied the boy.

Tensely, the scientist waited for the supersonic vibrations to do their work, carefully observing his subject for any change. How long dared he keep the dial on? In guinea pigs it had been a matter of seconds. He had learned to turn it off the moment he noticed a change in their behavior, because if he kept it on too long they dropped dead.

Keenly alert for the slightest change in his subject—and fearful of harming the child, Dr. DeLito was nevertheless taken by surprise when the change came. The idiot boy suddenly snapped, "Turn that thing off!"

The scientist hastily complied and removed the wires from the boy's temples, wiping his forehead in relief that no damage was done. Then he exclaimed delightedly, "You can talk now!" Before, the boy had only been capable of mouthing blubbering sounds.

"Of course I can talk. What's so surprising about that? And, incidentally, how did I get here?" The six-year-old boy glanced around the

laboratory in amazement. "This is strange. Last thing I remember was lecturing to my law students at Cornell University. I felt a pain in my chest and blacked out—must have been a heart seizure. Apparently it resulted in amnesia."

Dr. DeLito gasped and almost blacked out himself. The result of his experiment was far different than he had anticipated.

His object had been to stimulate reasoning powers in a faulty brain—but he had not bargained for the substitution of another intellect. Obviously the mind of some other person was now inhabiting the body of this child.

Appalled, he wondered if the substitution had worked both ways. Was some Cornell professor now babbling like an idiot in front of a classroom of students?

Before he could pursue this thought further, a shriek escaped the child. "Good Lord! This can't be I!" The boy was looking at himself, examining his hands and feet, and feeling his face. He jumped out of the chair and ran wildly to a small mirror which hung on the wall. He had to stand on tiptoe to see his face in the mirror. "I must be insane! I am having delusions—hallucinations! I appear to myself like a child of six instead of a man of fifty. What has happened? Where am I?"

Dr. DeLito gulped and looked nervously around the room. The entrance door was ajar, but fortunately none of his colleagues was in view. "Er, calm yourself," he implored. "I shall explain everything. First, may I give you a sedative?" He hastened to prepare one, but the boy refused it. "Now, just sit down quietly and I'll introduce myself. I am Dr. DeLito, and this is a laboratory at Stanford University."

The child controlled himself with admirable fortitude and replied icily, "And I, sir, am Mark Wigglesworth. Why am I at Stanford instead of Cornell? Have I been the victim of some ghastly experiment? Have you transplanted my brain into another body? If so, you shall answer for your crime!"

Dr. DeLito suppressed a moan. "In a sense, that's just what has happened," he admitted. "Not organically—" he hastened to add, "—there has been no surgery or violation of the physical body. Mentally, however, there

seems to have been a transference that occurred when I used my new invention, a subatomic vibrator, on a six-year-old retarded child."

The boy was highly indignant. "Then just whose mind is inhabiting my body at Cornell at this moment? The mind of a low grade moron? Good Lord, I'm ruined! Sir, I shall not only sue you and this University but I shall prefer criminal charges as well! To think that any ethical seat of learning should permit such outrageous and unprincipled experiments!"

Dr. DeLito frantically hurried to the door and closed it so no one could hear them. "Please bear with me," he begged Professor Wigglesworth. "Perhaps we can find some way out of this. You see, no one knew I was conducting this experiment and I did not have the University's sanction. Believe me, I shall do everything in my power to restore your mind to its rightful body."

"Through another experiment, no doubt," said the boy sarcastically. "Only next time, perhaps I'll be killed in the process. No thank you. Distasteful as this body may be, it's better than none at all."

Dr. DeLito did not press the subject further as at the moment he hadn't the faintest idea of how to go about rectifying his error. It would take a great deal of time and thought, and this was an emergency. How could he silence Wigglesworth until he had time to evolve a plan that would rescue both of them from a king size mess?

Hoping to pacify his victim, he attempted to divert him with conversation. "You must be the son of the distinguished Mark Wigglesworth of the same name, who was also a Cornell professor. My roommate at Stanford was a law student and he often referred to the Professor's texts."

"What nonsense!" snapped the boy. "Just because I now have the body of a child doesn't mean I am my own son. There has only been one Mark Wigglesworth, and my texts, I am proud to say, are widely read in all the colleges."

Overcome with shock, the scientist sank into a chair, trembling as a new possibility entered his mind. Perhaps there had *not* been an exchange of mentalities from one body to another. Perhaps it was something entirely different . . . too overwhelm-

ing to face. "B-but that's impossible," he croaked. "Professor Wigglesworth died in 1935."

"Obviously you are mistaken," pointed out the child. "This is the year 1935 and I am still alive—" He broke off and his face blanched. "Or *am* I? Perhaps in the shock of mind transference my other body succumbed. Perhaps I'm stuck in this one forever."

Dr. DeLito looked sick. In a weak voice he said, "Er—you don't understand. You see, Professor Wigglesworth, this is the year 1957."

It was Wigglesworth's turn to sink into a chair to keep from falling. "You mean—I have been dead for 22 years?"

The scientist nodded miserably. "At least, your *body* has been in the grave that long. Apparently your mind survived in the form of contraterrene energy, and my machine recoordinated it with terrene matter through the medium of this boy."

"Why, this is a monumental discovery!" cried Wigglesworth. "You have proved that the human mind survives beyond death of the body. If mine did, so must everyone else's."

DeLito was heartened to see that the Professor was no longer angry with him, and warmed up to this new trend of thought. "It tends to prove the theory of reincarnation," he agreed. "Of course, in a true reincarnation, the mind has no recollection of past lives, and the process is only accomplished through the birth of a new physical body, but—" He broke off as he followed this thought to its logical conclusion, then continued, "Er, of course that could not have happened in this case because according to the theory of reincarnation only one soul can inhabit the same body, and the boy's body you are now in must possess its own reincarnated soul acquired at birth—" His voice trailed off in embarrassment.

Professor Wigglesworth said with asperity, "Don't be afraid to say it. I'm not only with you, I'm way ahead of you. What you really mean is that I've been in this boy's body since its birth. It was my fate to be reincarnated in the form of a helpless child!"

Dr. DeLito reluctantly nodded. "Pure speculation, of course," he said apologetically. "But it does seem as though the effect of my experiment was to awaken your mind to recollection of a past

life, in another incarnation. My object was to awaken the part of the brain that deals with recollections of *this* life, but it seems to have activated the wrong section of the brain."

"I wonder what I did to deserve such an incarnation," the Professor brooded bitterly. "I have never studied Hindu theosophy but my understanding was that if we behaved ourselves and led virtuous lives of study and contemplation we would be rewarded with a better deal in the next incarnation. I was a bad boy in my childhood, it is true, but made up for it with an adulthood of study and contemplation."

"Oh, you aren't doing so badly," comforted DeLito. "At least you were *happy* in this life before I awakened the wrong set of memories. Think of how awfully those guinea pigs must have sinned in their former lives to come back in such a form. They obviously have human recollections now, and are trapped in the bodies of rodents. I think I shall apply euthanasia to them,—it would be the kindest thing to do."

"Perhaps you are right," said Wigglesworth grudgingly. "At least I have a young, healthy human body and a long life ahead of me, presumably. Which brings up the problem—just what *shall* I do with my new life? I can't go back to teaching law at Cornell, even though I am well qualified. They don't allow six-year-olds on the faculty."

At this moment they were alerted by the sound of footsteps. The door opened and the president of the University walked in. He went to the boy. "Come on, Leroy. Time to go home."

Wigglesworth looked questioningly at Dr. DeLito. The scientist gave him a warning look and said: "Don't you recognize your father, Leroy?"

The president smiled wryly. "No use prompting him. He doesn't even recognize his own mother. Perhaps it's nature's form of compensation to bless two high I.Q. Ph.D's with a intellectually limited son. But we're not complaining. We love him anyway."

Professor Mark Wigglesworth, better known as Leroy, could not resist a grin. Despite DeLito's stricken look, he answered his father, "My mental faculties have improved greatly during this session with Dr. DeLito."

The university president looked stunned, apparently

not believing his ears. He glanced in bewilderment at the scientist. "Am I having delusions or did you just hear what I heard?"

"I'm afraid so," said DeLito weakly. "Er, Leroy is really a very bright boy—a genius, in fact."

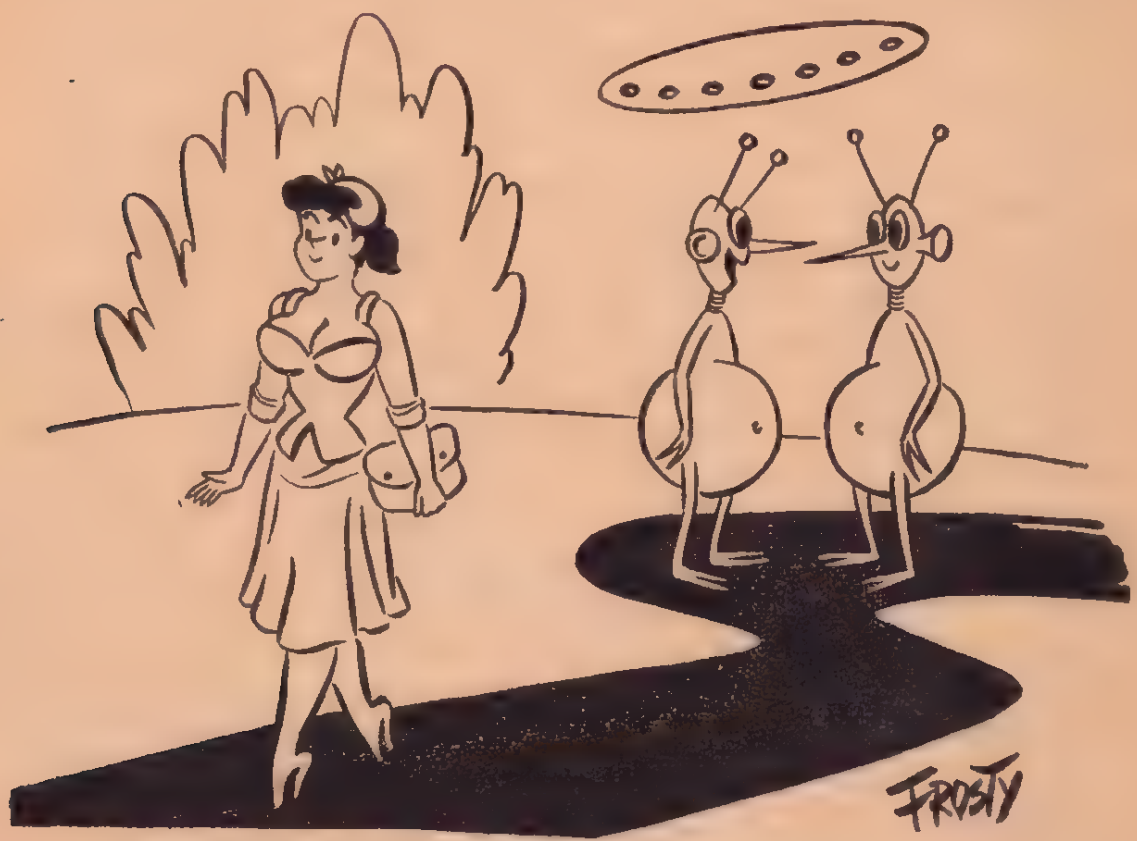
"B-but I don't understand! Why has he never talked before?"

It was Leroy who answered. "I have been too busy listening and absorbing the knowledge expounded by my brilliant parents. However, Dr. DeLito has convinced me that the time has now come to express myself." He turned to the scientist. "Good-bye, doctor, and thank you for a very edifying session. I have now decided upon my mission in this life—that of making my parents proud and happy."

With this, he took his father's hand and led the dazed but beaming man out of the laboratory.

Dr. DeLito mopped his brow, then carefully dismantled his invention, never to use it again.

THE END



"I think I've found the secret formula that makes Earth women: 36–24–36."

DEADLY HONEYMOON

By ADAM CHASE

Ed Huntley loved June and his proposal went something like this: "Marry me, darling, and instead of rice we'll be deluged with Martian radar-gnats. Instead of coffee pots and silverware we'll get Neptunian cobra-bats and Venusian saber-toothed elephants as presents." Well, that wasn't what he really said, but it turned out that way.

THE first indication Ed Huntley had of anything being amiss was when the covers were pulled off him too early in the morning.

Morning, of course, was a relative term, for Ed Huntley was sleeping in the bunkroom of the small space cruiser *Arcturus*, and the *Arcturus* was in deep space, where morning, noon, and night just didn't exist.

Not that morning, noon, and night would have existed the past few weeks for Ed Huntley anyway. Ed Huntley was a newlywed, and had shared the small quarters aboard the *Arcturus* blissfully with his brand new wife, so mornings, noons, and nights had blended into a happy timelessness.

But this particular morning, Ed Huntley was bereft of covers fully a half hour before the blue night lights were replaced by the white fluorescents of day. He blinked, shivered, and mumbled:

"Aw, cut out the clowning, hon," and tried to tug the covers back over his lanky frame.

They wouldn't come. Something was holding them. He couldn't budge them.

"Now, come on, June," Ed said, making it the nearest thing to a bellow that he could less than a minute after he'd been awakened.

Still, something was holding the bedclothes.

Since Ed Huntley slept in exactly the costume he'd been born with, the result was goose flesh. Then Ed took a

Like Noah of old, they marched the chosen beasts.

deep breath and really shouted.

"Give me back those goldarn covers, for crying out loud!"

A voice sailed into him from the galley. The galley was at the other end of the *Arcturus,* not a big ship as deep spaceships went, but still the distance from the bunkroom (bunks for two) to the galley, which drew its power from the ship's atomics and hence was located at the other end of the *Arcturus,* was seventy feet. That's where the voice came from, the galley. Came—through seventy feet of companionways. It was June's voice and all it wanted to know was, "What did you say, Ed?"

"June?" Ed shouted. "That you, June?"

He heard her laughter faintly, and, "Who did you expect, Mata Rasoon?" Mata Rasoon, a half-caste Martian-Earthian, was the latest rave of the vid-circuits.

"Then who," Ed said in a very soft voice which June didn't hear, "is grabbing the darn—"

He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he yanked at the corner of the bedclothes still within his reach. Something yanked back.

Ed opened his eyes wide.

Something about the size of a terrier scurried away on multiple purple legs.

"June!" Ed cried.

Maybe it was the sound of his voice. Anyway, she sensed something was wrong. She came, heels clacking, up the companionway. She was breathless, and breathlessly lovely, in the kind of scant costume only a pretty newlywed girl would wear, and only in the complete privacy of a spaceship for two.

"What happened?"

"The covers," Ed said, pointing. The bedclothes were on the floor.

"So?" June stood there, arms akimbo, a look of perplexity on her face.

Ed gestured to take in the rear of the *Arcturus,* where the cage-compartments were located. "Something," he told his bride of three weeks, "is loose."

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't yank the covers off. Something else did."

The vague smile suddenly left June's face. "Ed," she said. "Ed—you're sure?"

He nodded.

"D—did you see what it was?"

The Huntleys had some seventy specimens of extra-

solar life aboard the *Arcturus,* collected during their three weeks of honeymooning in the Fomalhaut-Gideon's Star sector of space. It was mixing business with pleasure, Ed had told his bride at the beginning. Since the specimens would bring an average of fifty credits each at the various solar system zoos, the honeymoon would more than pay for itself. And besides, the Huntleys had had a fine time tramping on the alien soil of a dozen outworlds to collect their specimens.

"Sure," Ed told his wife now as he got up and dressed. "It was a kjur."

June looked at his face, which had creased into a deep frown. "A kjur?" she said, watching him for some signs of a smile. There wasn't any. "But why're you worried about a kjur? They're harmless. You said so yourself. We only have three or four dangerous specimens aboard, and the kjur isn't one of them."

Ed nodded. He went to the arms cabinet and took out two blasters, buckling one around his own waist and passing one to June. "Aren't you being a shade melodramatic?" she asked. "Blasters, really!"

"They aren't for the kjur. To heck with the kjur. But the kjur," Ed finished grimly, "is a practical joker."

"I know that. A harmless, centipedal, twenty pound practical joking denizen of Fomalhaut VII. So?"

Ed headed for the companionway, lighting a cigarette, disliking its taste on an empty stomach, and immediately grinding it out underfoot. He turned around and said over his shoulder, "Wear your blaster, June. And be ready for anything."

"Anything?" She was smiling at him, waiting for him to smile back, to tell her it was all a joke, not the kind of practical joke a kjur might pull, but a joke that Ed Huntley, newlywed, might spring on his bride.

"Anything," Ed said, repeating her word. "It depends on what kind of practical joke the kjur thought of."

He went down the companionway. He had not even kissed June good morning, which was indication enough of how seriously he took the situation.

Twenty minutes later, he joined June in the control room. He wore a grim expression on his face. He was carrying something.

"Why — that's a kjur!" June cried, astonished.

Ed put the kjur's dead body down near the control board. It was a smallish purple-pelted animal with a couple of dozen legs. Blood matted the purple pelt and made it look black. The blood ran from a large hole where the kjur's throat had been.

"I didn't hear your blaster," June said. "Did you really have to kill it?"

Ed shook his head. "I'd have put it back in storage," he said. "I didn't kill it."

"Didn't kill it?" June repeated, her voice puzzled.

"No. But something else did."

"What—I don't—"

"The kjur's practical joke," Ed said. "Before it died, the kjur set something else loose." Kjurs, Ed and June both knew, had an instinct for mischief. It was inborn in them, as an instinct for self preservation is in most terrestrial animals. The kjur would cheerfully die if it could die committing a practical joke. This one had.

"What did it turn loose?" June asked. For the first time, she sounded worried.

Ed shook his head. "I won't know until I go back there. The kjur's a small animal, so although it was killed viciously by something aboard, it doesn't mean that's something we might have to worry about. There are maybe a dozen specimens back there that could kill the kjur, but only four that could hurt us."

"You're going to take a look?"

"I have to find what we're to be on the lookout for."

"But — Ed, I'm scared. Can't you just—can't we lock ourselves in the control room until we planetfall?"

"We're two weeks from nowhere, June."

"Well, we could load the control room with food, and seal off the lock, and—"

"Is that how you want to spend the rest of your honeymoon?"

"I—"

"Don't worry, kid. I'll be careful. I tell you what. There's no reason why you can't lock yourself in. Don't open up, unless you hear my voice. Promise?"

"Ed. . . ."

He took her in his arms.

Just then something scurried away behind his back.

June screamed.

Ed let go of her. "What is it, hon?"

"Ed—Ed, I saw something!"

"Well?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it clearly. It—it must have been whatever the kjur set loose. It's free. Free on the ship, Ed."

"But when you saw it, it ran away?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then it's afraid of you, whatever it is. You have no reason to fear it if it's afraid of you. Did it leave the control room?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then lock yourself in. I'll be back."

He kissed her and went. A moment later he heard the round lock-door slam into place. He felt that was about the softest place for her.

In the shadows behind the transparent-walled engine room something moved. Ed was able to identify it as a furry herbiverous denizen of Gideon's Planet before it disappeared down the companionway, its furclad feet whispering on the metal. Ed frowned. The little furclad animal was a lettuce eater. It didn't have the equipment or the impulses to rip the kjur's throat out.

Which meant, Ed knew now, that the kjur had released more than one specimen.

He started running, his boots pounding on the metal of the companionway.

Something fluttered at his face and instinctively he brought the blaster up. He didn't fire. A white snow-bat of Gideon's Planet flew ahead of him in the companionway, to disappear at one of the storeroom branch-offs.

The small herbivor.

Then the snow-bat.

And whatever it was that had killed the kjur.

Just how many animals, Ed wondered in mounting dread, had the dead kjur released?

He stumbled over another animal corpse at the doorway to the specimen room. It was the snow-bat. No, Ed thought, kneeling. It was the snow-bat's mate, for the body was cold. The snow-bat, dead, looked like a giant white hamster with wings. And with a blood-red blossom where its throat had been.

Something nearby screamed.

It circled overhead, dropping on white leathery wings. The second snow-bat. It perched near its slain mate and the shrill screaming continued. It looked at Ed malevolently, as if Ed was to blame.

Ed ignored it and used his thumb on the whorl-lock of the specimen room. That is,

he started to use his thumb, then realized it wasn't necessary. The lock had been sprung—from the inside, of course.

Ed pushed the door in, his blaster ready.

His worst fears were realized. Every cage had been opened. Of the seventy specimens from all the worlds of the Fomalhaut system, from Gideon's Planet and the Snares, only one remained in the specimen room. It was a snake, and it was moulting. Otherwise it too would have been gone.

Ed allowed himself the satisfaction of a grin. He felt it pull at his lips and realized that if he could see his face there would be no humor in the grin. At least the snake was some consolation. It was a Gideon viper, and deadly. The discarded skin was already dull. The new skin, delicately designed, looked wet.

Ed aimed carefully from a distance of three feet and shot the Gideon viper's head off. The wet body twitched and was still.

One deadly specimen gone, Ed thought bleakly. Three to go. Hiding somewhere aboard the *Arcturus*.

He went back, running, to the control room.

When she learned that their worst fears had been realized, June's behavior changed. Her fear didn't vanish, but the threat of hysteria was gone. Ed was proud of his bride at that moment, and hardly had time to realize it.

They talked about their situation over breakfast. Ed's blaster was on the table near his right hand. It gave the situation a melodramatic aspect, and made June smile.

"O.K.," he said, "at least we know where we stand. I've got the Gideon viper. That leaves the ranjarr and a pair of Fomalhautian parebas. The ranjarr is a nocturnal animal, very sluggish in daylight. So that's rule one. No more night lights. Bright artificial day—always."

June groaned. She had loved the blue night lights—particularly on certain frequent occasions which highlighted this or any honeymoon.

Ed grinned at her, patted her hand, and sipped his coffee. "I ought to be able to hunt down the ranjarr," he said.

"Its bite is poisonous!" June objected.

"Sure, but it'll hardly move in daylight. The light blinds

it. As for the pair of parebas—"

June shuddered. The ranjarr was a small carnivore the size of a wildcat, with poisonous fangs. It was bad enough. But at least it was something she could think about without shivering. The parebas, though, were Fomalhautian scorpions grown monstrous. Scorpions two feet long. With fifteen-inch stingers. June shuddered again, thinking of them. To get her mind off them she said, "That's all we have to worry about?"

"Far as I know. One ranjarr and two parebas. It's enough."

"I mean, what about the uncatalogued specimens?"

Ed frowned, lost in thought. "Nope," he said. "Only one." He smiled.

In spite of their predicament, June laughed. Their one uncatalogued specimen, found on Gideon's Planet, had been christened Gideon's blob by both of them. Blob. Blob was the only word. It was their largest specimen. It was almost as big as a man. It was much fatter. It had a roundish green body and several tentacles and a small round head. It was so sluggish they had called it The Blob right off. They had never figured out what it ate. Every day of the trip Ed had brought food to its cage, a mixture of carniverous and herbiverous fare. The Blob had ignored both kinds. The Blob hadn't made a sound. The Blob just remained there, listlessly, in its cage. In fact, seeing all the cages opened, Ed had even been surprised that The Blob had decided to seek its freedom. No, they wouldn't have to worry about The Blob. But, he wondered, on a small ship like the *Arcturus,* where could a large animal like The Blob hide?

Ed told June, "It was the ranjarr that did the killing. It's a vicious little animal, kills without being hungry, apparently for the sheer joy of it." He told her about the snow-bat. He added, "But I don't know if the ranjarr will attack an animal as big as a human being."

"Its bite is poisonous," June reminded him.

"Still, I think it's the parebas we have to worry about."

June smiled. "You're forgetting the uncatalogued Blob. Maybe he's deadly."

"Maybe," Ed said, "I'm a Tyrannosaurus Rex."

He waited for June to smile. She always smiled at his jokes.

Instead she screamed.

It was one of the parebas, up on the small stove behind Ed, its stinger waving, exploring empty air.

Ed whirled and got up, knocking his chair over. The pareba, looking almost exactly like a magnified scorpion, tensed for action.

Ed lifted the blaster. In a blur of action, the pareba scurried off the stove and across the floor, heading for Ed's leg. June stood frozen, her mouth open, one hand to it. Ed blasted the pareba into slime and chiten three feet from his leg.

When he turned back to the table, Ed said, "All right, I've had enough of this. We're not going to sit around and wait for them to come to us. We hunted them once, in their native habitats, so we can hunt them again, and either kill them or put them back in their cages where they belong. What do you say?"

June nodded. Thinking of waiting around until the other pareba came, maybe at night when they were asleep, she realized Ed was right."

They armed themselves with stingers as well as their blasters. The stingers, of course, were standard bring-em-back-alive equipment. A stinger could paralyze anything up to and including a terrestrial elephant. As far as Ed knew, nothing was immune to its ray.

Trying to make light of the situation, June said, "What if The Blob refuses to be stung?"

Ed laughed.

"Well, it *is* uncatalogued, and when we caught it all you had to do was shoo it into the cage. Remember how it lumbered in?"

Ed remembered, and said so. Then, armed, they set out.

The first thing Ed did was set a trap for the ranjarr, using the slain snow-bat as bait. It was a trap on the age-old principle of a bear trap, but cut down to scale for the small, deadly animal.

Ed nodded, satisfied. "All right," he said. "Now for some herding. Just remember, keep your eye open for the ranjarr."

June looked at him with stars in her eyes. At that moment she was prouder of her husband than she'd been since their marriage. He really took charge of things, Ed did. Of course, Ed's confidence was an act in part, to instill courage in June. But he certainly wasn't a coward.

Ed's roundup proved eas-

ier than he had thought. Six hours after he had awakened with the feeling that something was wrong, all but three specimens had been herded back to their cages. Sweating, more than a little breathless, Ed said, "See, what were you worrying about? We're practically finished, and the specimens are safe and sound."

"Oh, sure, Frank Buck," June told him sarcastically. "Except that the specimens unaccounted for—well, two of them are the two deadly ones we have to worry about."

Ed knew she was right. The pint-sized bear trap hadn't caught them the missing ranjarr yet. The pareba hadn't been found. But Ed grinned. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked his bride. "The third missing specimen is The Blob. You ought to really be scared."

June was thinking of an adequate retort in defense of the large, placid green animal, but just then they both heard a growling sound.

"Ranjarr?" June asked, unholstering her blaster.

Ed nodded. Then the ranjarr screamed. It sounded like a scream of terror, and this time Ed thought he was able to locate it. The scream came from the companionway where he'd placed the pint-sized bear trap.

Ed started running, with June behind him.

When they reached the trap, Ed pulled up short. June, bumping him from behind, almost knocked him over. The ranjarr, one of its hind paws caught, was trapped. Also, it was dying.

Eyes red-rimmed, slavering, jaw slack, it looked up at them. "It's a horrible little beast," June said.

It was a horrible little beast, no doubt about it. It was a lethal little beast. But it was dying.

"Look out!" Ed cried.

He turned, his hand swung at June, she felt herself deposited ungracefully on her duff. Something fell to the floor near her, and she heard Ed's blaster roar.

The dead pareba, when she could bring herself to look at it, was blasted to bits.

Ed helped her to her feet. "What happened," he explained, "was this: our bear trap caught the ranjarr, all right. Then along came the pareba. The pareba stung the ranjarr, poisoning it." Even as he spoke, the ranjarr breathed convulsively, lifted its head, made a whimpering

sound, and died. "Then the pareba must have heard us coming, so instead of sucking the ranjarr dry as it would have done, it waited. For something more juicy, June. For the juiciest little—"

"Shut up, Ed Huntley," June said as he helped her to her feet. "And you didn't have to hit me so hard. And if you think you're going to take me on this kind of honeymoon ever again—"

Ed was smiling. "One honeymoon to a customer," he said.

Then June was serious. "Now that we're finished, it —it seems like a nightmare. Hold me, Ed."

He held her. That was like a dream, all right, but not a nightmare. "I—I wish you could hold me this way forever, Ed."

"Sorry, there's a waiting list a mile long."

"Oh, you—"

"But, tell you what. Now that the messy work's finished, how's about a little trip to the bunkroom, where—"

"Hold on, hero. Aren't you forgetting something?"

"No. What?"

"The Blob," June said.

Ed made a face as if he was terrified. The Blob, even if still hiding somewhere, was absolutely harmless. They didn't have to worry about the strange, slothful creature. In fact, now that the danger was past, they could joke about it.

And then, as if on cue, The Blob appeared in the companionway.

"Speak of the devil," June said.

The Blob shuffled a little way towards them. Perhaps shuffle was the wrong word, for The Blob locomoted on tentacles, thick, fatty ones. Still, they made a plopping noise as it came toward them, and the small head bobbed as if the animal was shuffling.

Ed made a shooing motion with his arms. "Go back!" he said. "Go back to your cage, Blob!"

He moved toward The Blob.

The Blob stopped its advance, but didn't retreat.

"Go on, scram!" Ed shouted.

June smiled. The Blob just wasn't listening to him.

As far as he was concerned, Ed had a date with his bride. He didn't want The Blob to delay it, so he took out his stinger and pointed it at the fat animal's middle.

"Are you going to get lost?" he said. "Are you

going to return to your cage like a nice Blob?"

"Oh, Ed. It can't understand you."

The Blob just looked at them uncomprehendingly. It blinked. One tentacle lifted, wavering, and then fell. For The Blob, that was a lot of wasted motion. It really was a sluggish animal.

"Think you could help me drag it, inert, back where it belongs?" Ed asked.

June nodded. "But I almost hate for you to have to use the stinger on it."

Ed pointed out, "Stinger's painless. Here goes."

He raised the stinger. The Blob just looked at him. At the last moment, just before he fired, an expression came into the animal's face for the first time. It was in the eyes, really. The eyes looked outraged as if the creature, could it speak, would be mouthing its indignation over the fact that anyone attacked it—with a painless stinger or anything.

Ed fired.

The stinger bucked in his hand. The ray glowed, then Ed twisted the focus nob and a thin pencil of radiance, enough to stun an elephant, knifed into the fat green body of The Blob. The Blob just stood there, which was expected. The Blob balanced so perfectly on the broad base of its tentacles that it would not fall over when unconscious.

"All right, let's drag it back there," Ed said.

June winced. "This is the part I'm going to love."

"Well, we might as well get it over with."

As Ed approached it, The Blob moved one of its tentacles.

"What the heck!" Ed cried.

The Blob blinked its eyes. The Blob hadn't been stunned.

Disbelief on his face, Ed fired the stinger again.

The Blob shuddered and made a sound. The sound did not come from its mouth. The sound came from its body. The body creaked. Then there was a cracking noise. A split appeared on The Blob's fat abdomen.

"Ed!" June cried.

He saw it too. The split widened. The Blob went on shuddering. Its form seemed to waver. There was a stench, like raw slime. The Blob coalesced, becoming shapeless. It was a green shapelessness. Tentatively, curious, Ed reached out and touched it. He pulled his hand away as if he'd been stung. The green

shapelessness was soft, yielding, gelatinous. The Blob—which really was a blob now, completely shapeless—quivered. Ed blinked. He couldn't believe his eyes. The Blob broke into pieces, thirty or forty of them. The pieces began to take shape. Each one became a junior-sized Blob, as the creature had originally been, except they were much smaller, of course, and lean, and, somehow, active-looking.

"My goodness," June whispered in an awed voice.

"A sexual reproduction," Ed explained, although his voice wasn't steady, either. "Apparently The Blob reproduces when it thinks it's in danger." Then his voice became enthusiastic. "Don't you see, June, this ought to be worth a fortune! The biggest zoos in the solar system will bid each other into the poor house over it. There isn't another creature in the universe like this one—at least not a creature big enough to see without a microscope. We'll make a fortune on it!"

"Ed—look."

The Blobs—all thirty-odd of them—were moving. Much faster than their "parent" had ever moved. Yet, the way they marched quickly into a semi-circle, their tentacles moving up and down almost like quick-pumping legs, it seemed that, in some unknown way, a single intelligence governed them. Or, Ed thought vaguely, perhaps they instinctively functioned as a team since, until a few moments ago, they had been but one animal.

"Ed," June said, her voice taking on the first trace of fear. "Ed—they're surrounding us."

Ed snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. You're still a little hysterical from what happened before. They're no more surrounding us than—"

But Ed's voice trailed off. The Blobs' semicircle was now complete, with the Huntleys in the center of it, their backs to a bulkhead. Ed advanced toward the creatures. They didn't try to hurt him, but merely closed ranks and wouldn't let him through. Annoyed, he raised his stinger.

"Hold it!" June cried. "What if they do it all over again?"

"Let them. If they split like that again they'd be too small to hurt us."

"No, Ed, look. They're all growing."

They were. Each was al-

most three feet tall now. They seemed to feed on themselves —or perhaps on energy. On energy, Ed decided, was more like it. On the energy of his stinger, which made them split in the first place.

Ed advanced again. The Blobs wouldn't let him through. One of them seemed to flick out a tentacle almost nonchalantly. Ed banged against the bulkhead, seeing stars. These Blobs were fast. They closed their circle.

And deadly?

Ed raised his blaster. The Blobs were almost on them. Ed looked at June. She shook her head. She didn't say anything, but her eyes told him to wait, not to make the first overt attack.

The semi-circle had become so much smaller that the ranks of Blobs were two deep now. They didn't make a sound, except for the plopping-shuffle of their tentacles. Then they ranged themselves like statues. Ed could have reached out and touched the closest ones. He didn't. His blaster was ready, though. Time seemed to hang motionless over a pit into which the seconds fell, slowly, reluctantly.

A tentacle flicked out.

Ed fell down.

June cried out, as another tentacle curled around her ankle, bringing her down. June screamed.

Ed fired the blaster.

There was a booming reverberation. If you can help it, a blaster is not meant to be fired in the companionway of a small spaceship. The release of energy is too great.

The first thing Ed saw as the smoke cleared was the bulkhead on the opposite side of the companionway. It was dripping molten metal, the metal running down to the floor into a new-formed pile of slag.

Ed helped June to her feet. He got up himself.

The Blobs had backed off, watching him.

No, not the same Blobs.

Smaller Blobs, but growing ones.

The blaster hadn't killed them. It had frightened them into reproducing again. There were probably a thousand of them now, incredibly small, no more than six inches in height. They clustered on the floor in one end of the companionway. And, even as Ed watched, they were growing. The Blobs absorbed energy, split, stored the energy, and grew on it. The blaster contained far more energy than a stinger. The Blobs grew.

Ed looked at June. Her face was white, drawn. She watched The Blobs growing. "Come on," he said. "It's going to get crowded in here."

They ran the other way, toward the control room. The Blobs, very active now, pursued them. By the time they neared the control room, the Blobs were back to being about three feet tall. There were hundreds of them. They filled the ship, except for the control room. If they got in there too. . . .

Ed didn't want to think about it. He fumbled with the round metal door. His hand shook so he couldn't jam his thumb into the whorl-lock.

"They're coming!" June cried.

Ed told her: "Use your blaster!"

"But I—they—"

"Do as you're told, June, please! No time to argue."

He heard the blaster's roar. He fumbled with the lock. The control-room door opened suddenly. Ed took one look behind him. There were thousands of Blobs out there, all the way back in the companionway as far as he could see. They were small, but growing.

Together with June, he plunged into the control room.

A half dozen of the small Blobs, growing, followed them in before Ed could slam the big round door. June ran toward the controls. Horrified, she faced The Blobs.

They came forward, still growing. They were back to their three-foot size. Ed did the only thing he could do. He didn't dare use his blaster, or the stinger. The Blobs could absorb energy from them. Instead, one at a time, Ed strangled the small creatures. It was a messy job, and June had fainted when he'd only handled three of them. He finished the job in silence. Then, before he brought June around, he was quietly but rackingly sick.

Afterwards, he could hear the thousands of Blobs outside pounding against the door. He wondered how long it would take them to break it down—if he let them do it.

He wasn't going to, of course.

First he saw to June, tugging at her earlobes until she came out of it. Pale and silent, she sat up. He helped her to her feet.

The rest was easy. They got into their spacesuits and helmets. Then Ed pulled the lever which evacuated all the

air from the *Arcturus*. This was an emergency device to be used in the event that the ship's air had been contaminated. As it was, Ed and June would be able to live on canned air the rest of the way home.

When a sufficient time had passed, Ed clanked out into the companionway. The Blobs —every last one of them— were dead. But so too, of course, were all the specimens in the rear of the ship.

"Oh, Ed," June said on the intercom. "All our work!"

"I evacuated the air, not the pressure," Ed explained. "Museums don't pay as much as zoos do for specimens, but they pay. The honeymoon will still more than pay for itself."

"Some honeymoon," June said.

But he saw her smiling through her faceplate.

The hardest part of the rest of the trip home was that they couldn't climb out of their spacesuits once, not even for a kiss. Or something.

THE END

"When do we get to meet your Captain Video?"

OPERATION FEMALE

By PAUL DALLAS

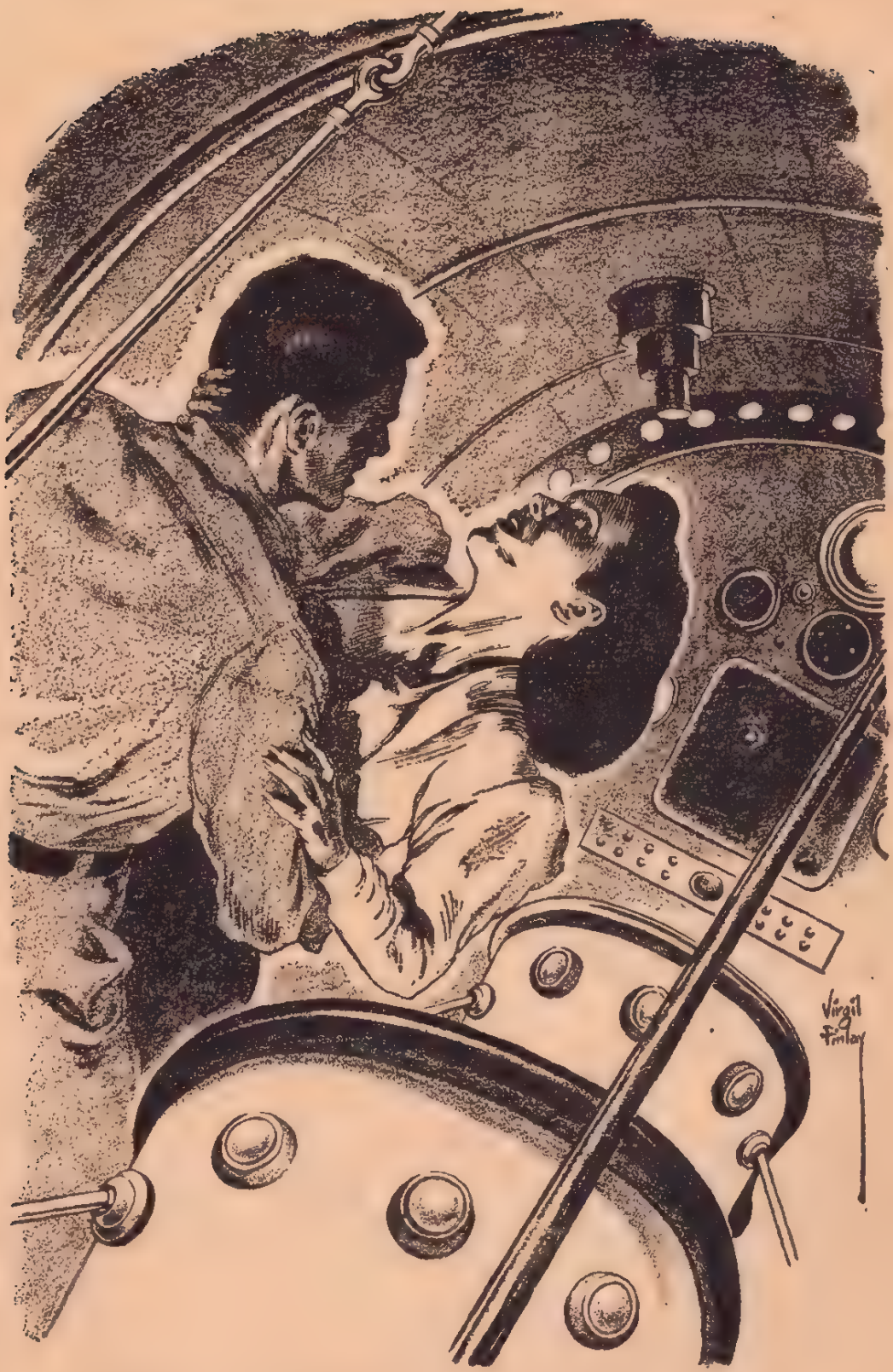
Invaders have attacked with stealth, brutality, propaganda, and intrigue. They have come thundering in with manpower and firepower. But this was the first time an unspeakable conqueror arrived with nothing but love!

THE generators activating the repeller rays stepped up their tempo. The low hum became a high-pitched whine. In each of the three rooms, blue lights winked their message. Something was approaching, and the satellite was securing itself against possible attack.

For the first fifteen seconds, Lieutenant Hal Russell, officer in charge and sole occupant of the patrol craft, slept on, dreaming blissfully of the swift passage of the next thirty days. His tour of duty would be over and he would be back on Earth, entitled to ninety days leave. And during the past two months he had been making plans for that leave. A bottle—in fact, several bottles—were involved in his plans; an assortment of blondes and a sprinkling of brunettes, laced with redheads, were a part of the overall picture. He smiled absently as he nuzzled the pillow.

Then, as the automatic defense mechanisms clicked off their assigned reactions, Lieutenant Russell came awake, his trained mind and body reacting smoothly to the situation. Somewhere out in this desolate part of space, an object was approaching. It could mean a stray traveler who needed supplies or information, a routine check by some command ship, or—and this is what always must be presumed—it could be the long-awaited action by the enemy.

Hal ran into the control room. His practiced eyes swept the main board. Every-



"This is all that's importanr—nothing else matters!"

thing was in order. Pressing the transmitter, he challenged. "This is the patrol satellite, orbiting Planet 326 in the Garsson cluster. You are approaching my repellant field. You may not enter under power. If you wish to contact this satellite, circle the perimeter and call me on Universal wavelength."

He listened for a moment. Silence. Then a woman's voice came in. Hysterical.

"I need your help! I've got to come in! Quickly, please!"

"Keep circling. I'll clear you in about ten minutes." Stay off the air in the meantime."

"Oh, please, I've got to come in right away!" They may be after me, and if they catch me . . . please let me in."

"Get a hold of yourself. You'll come in when I've cleared you. Meanwhile stay off the air. You'll only delay procedure. Keep circling in your present position, and I'll call you when I'm ready for you. I'll make it as quick as I can."

This was something he had not counted on; yet he had been warned to expect the unexpected. The trouble with the Trodites, as he saw it, was the fact that they had no real shape of their own. Being basically a purely electrical force, they were invisible except when they chose to rearrange their energy structure —and then they could assume any shape. For all he knew, that girl calling him was a Trodite . . . but at the same time, if she wasn't, he couldn't very well refuse her permission to come aboard.

He twirled knobs and set switches, clearing a narrow winding path through the repellant field; bringing the image of her ship in on his searcher screen. At least she did come in a standard craft; Trodites wouldn't have found that necessary, he reflected. They could travel in their electrical form, and then materialize just outside the repellant field. But in order to maintain their structure in an assumed shape they would have to remain grounded. So one thing was sure. If the girl were a Trodite, she couldn't pass through the hull of his satellite, since it had a sandwich lining of electrically insulative material.

He had to make a decision. He pressed the transmitter button. "All right. Throw her into hover."

In a moment the girl's voice answered, "She's hovering."

"Point the nose toward the red flashing light. Can you see it?"

"Yes. I'm pointing right at it."

"Good. Now switch off all power. You must not draw any power at all while you are coming through or your ship will be seriously damaged. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"As soon as your power is off, I'll draw you through the cleared path to a mooring position. We'll be able to communicate through induction. Now throw your main switch. Then we'll take it from there."

The contact with the satellite seemed to have had a calming influence on the girl; she was following his orders efficiently. "Off," she said.

Hal set the attraction beam to follow the path he had cleared, then flipped the speech switch to induction.

"Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," she confirmed. "I can't be followed in, can I?"

"No. The mass of your ship has been calculated and we're emitting sufficient attraction for you alone."

"Thanks." There was depth of feeling in her voice—apology for doubt, and gratitude for rescue. Hal checked himself. With his luck she would turn out to be a real dog. Blind dates hardly ever worked out, and this wasn't much different from a blind date.

He brought the craft alongside, forming an airlock over its hatch, then locked it in position and switched off the path.

"Hey, how do I get out of here? The hatch is stuck!"

"It's not stuck," Hal answered, smiling to himself. "You won't be able to open it until I press the release."

"Well, press it," she pouted.

"In just a moment. First, some questions. Where are you from?"

"You mean where did I just come from?"

"No. Where were you born? Where did you live?"

"You mean, back on Planet Earth?" she teased.

"Yes, back on Earth," he said impatiently. "Now look here, young lady, you will not be allowed to leave your ship until you have satisfactorily answered my questions."

"Yes, sir," she said in her best military fashion. "I was born in the village of New York. I was brought up in the same place, and I used to play in the ruins of the old city. My favorite game was cowboys and Indians. They used to say I was old-fashioned."

"All right, all right, stick with the questions I ask." Just like a dame, he thought. One

minute she's scared silly, and the next, she treats all the precautions taken to safeguard her as nothing but a game.

"I suppose you went to school?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, who's the only President to have served four terms in the early United States?"

There was a long pause.

"Gee whiz," she complained, "what kind of a quiz is this? I never was any good at history. Can't we just skip that one?"

"I'm afraid not. If you went to school on Earth, you must have learned it. Let's have the answer."

"Oh, I can't seem to think. Was it Lincoln?"

"No."

"Wait, I've got it! Roosevelt—Teddy Roosevelt. Now can I come in?"

"Wrong answer!" Hal had trouble keeping the laughter from showing.

"Wrong?"

"Yup. Right name, wrong President. It was Franklin But I suppose you were close enough . . . come on in." He pressed the release button.

She came through the doorway. He stopped in midstep and caught his breath. She was dressed in a neat white blouse and some sort of tight pants which did nothing to hide her trim figure. In fact, the blouse threatened at any moment, to reveal a good deal more of it. She was carrying a heavy suitcase. The strain it created provided a feast for Hal's girl-starved eyes. Her delicate features had a fresh beauty and her clear blue eyes held him hypnotized. Then he broke the spell and came forward to relieve her of her burden.

"Hi," he said. "Welcome aboard!"

"Thanks." She looked around her.

He put her suitcase in the lounge and turned, to see her staring out a small port.

"I'll have to get the full details of your arrival for my report."

"What report, Lieutenant?"

"I have to report all activity to my Headquarters, Miss . . . er . . . miss?"

"Clayton. Myna Clayton."

"I'm Lieutenant Hal Russell."

She smiled.

"Would you like a cup of coffee or something before we get started?"

"No, thank you. I'd just as soon get it over with. Actually, this satellite may be in danger right now, and I think

you ought to know just what's going on out there."

"Good, let's get right to it."

He switched on the recorder and looked at Myna expectantly. "All set. Let's have your story."

She began quietly. "I was born on Earth in the Village of New York. For the past five years I've lived on Planet 326 in the Garsson cluster with my father. He is a prospector. About six months ago, he saw some weird shapes moving about in the wild, mountainous country which he was exploring. In the time I was on the planet, we saw only five or six other Earth people, all independent prospectors like my father, and recently two of them came into our area and confirmed the stories. They, too, had seen the mysterious shapes, and we all came to the same conclusion: Trodites had landed on the planet and were using it as a base.

"I begged my father to abandon his diggings and return to Earth, but he refused. My mother died on Earth when I was a child, and my father didn't like the idea of going back. He had a deep faith that someday he would make a big strike."

Hal glanced at the instrument board. Then reassured, turned his attention back to the girl. "Go on."

"Finally, last night Father's weird shapes materialized." She stopped, passed a hand over her eyes as though from shock. "They were awful! Father held them off for a while with an old generator assembly he had rigged up, but it was weak and couldn't run long."

Hal eyed her with concern. "Would you like to rest?"

She brushed the suggestion aside. "We got ready for blast-off. But just as Dad got to the ladder, a hand materialized in front of him. Just a hand. The size of a full-grown man. It grabbed him and held him tight. Other more complete forms appeared around him. He shouted at me to take off. I—I obeyed him. I slammed the door and came straight here. Now I— Oh, why did I do it? I should have stayed." A great weariness settled on her. She sagged in the chair.

"You've been through a great deal," Hal said gently. "But you're safe now."

Her features relaxed and new life seemed to flood into her body. "You're very nice."

"It's not hard in this case."

"What do we do now, Lieutenant?"

"First thing, we'll make yor

comfortable. You're apt to be here for several days. It'll take that long for them to organize a rescue party to come up and get you. Of course, I can't leave my post. So, you move into the bedroom and I'll sleep out here." He carried her luggage into the bedroom.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll send in my report and include your message. I'll let you know what's happening as soon as I get word."

He turned to go back to the control room.

"Lieutenant."

"Make it 'Hal' "

She hesitated. "All right, Hal." Her voice was warm and soft. "I was only thinking, aren't we in danger here? If the Trodites are out there, couldn't they attack us and take control of the ship?"

"Not a chance. The repellant field will keep them off. All we have to do is wait."

"But under the circumstances, couldn't you leave your orbit and head back to Earth to make your report in person?"

"It's not that simple. I'm stationed here just to report this sort of thing. In any case, in order to accumulate enough power to break out of orbit, I'd have to reduce the repellant field. Then we'd be vulnerable to an attack. So we'll just stick it out until reinforcements arrive."

He was gratified to see the reassurance in her face, and wished that he felt as secure as he had just made her feel. He left the bedroom, and sat down at the radio controls.

He adjusted the panel. "Earth Satellite 326-GC calling Earth Headquarters, emergency, signal red, come in, please."

There was no reply. He repeated the call. No answer. He switched to full amplification. He called and called, straining to catch some faint answering signal. But the vast empty cauldron of space was silent. An ominous quiet pressed heavily around the tiny satellite. Hal twirled dials, changed wave-lengths, used every trick in the book to establish contact with Earth, but with no success.

Then a voice broke through, almost shattering his eardrums. He jerked the volume down. "Earth Satellite 326-GC! Your radio is blanketed by the Trodite Expeditionary Forces. We call on you now to surrender your ship to our control. You are surrounded. You can neither send nor receive messages. Surrender immediately!"

Hal's reaction was instan-

taneous, violent—and negative.

"You are being foolish, Earthman. Resistance is useless. You are entirely cut off. If you will surrender immediately, you will be treated with full honors. If you do not, we shall annihilate you."

"Look, bub," Hal growled. "Your best bet is to get back where you belong. You know perfectly well that you can't touch me or this ship. It will only be a question of time before reinforcements arrive and blast you to all hell. Get out while you can, and clear my airwaves."

"There will be no reinforcements, Earthman. We have weapons you know nothing about. We have the means of entering your ship, but we give you this chance to save your life by cooperating."

"Nuts," Hal grunted. "You don't impress me a bit. Try coming through my field and you won't know what hit you."

"We'll be coming through, Earthman, we'll be through!"

With a vicious snap, Hal switched off the radio. He didn't feel the confidence he had displayed for the benefit of the Trodites.

What worried him was the confidence with which the Trodites had threatened to come right through his repellant field and enter his satellite. It might have been mere braggadocio, to scare him into a swift surrender—but it might have had some basis in fact. After all, the Trodites must have spent considerable time planning their move, and it was quite possible that they had developed weapons which were not known to Earth.

For better or for worse, he was stuck with it; he would not consider surrender. Then he remembered his guest. Things would go very hard with her if they were able to break in—after all, she had escaped from them once, and had flown to warn him of their presence.

He walked to a switch panel and regarded it thoughtfully. The big red handle, when pulled down, would suffuse a mild magnetic field throughout the interior of the ship, and no Trodite would be able to materialize. Their presence alone could not harm him—or Myna—since they required some physical form to do their damage. He reached for the lever—then stopped. Would it not be wiser to leave that as a last resort? If he pulled it now, he would never know if they could penetrate the ship. On the other hand, if he sta-

tioned himself near the control, and pulled it only as a last resort he would know if they effected an entry.

Hal was startled by a noise and whirled, to see Myna enter the room. She was wearing a long gown of filament trylite over a brief garment. The filmy powder-blue material draped itself over each ripe curve, accentuating the throbbing womanhood it decorated.

Hal's breath caught. His eyes burned against the shimmering beauty.

"Myna!" he half whispered.

She stood in the doorway, one hand raised, resting lightly on the side of the door. Her lips were parted, her eyes fixed on his face.

"Myna," he repeated.

Her downcast eyes were her only answer.

He reached out and took her hand. She remained passive but her blue eyes pierced his. They melted his resolve and left only his great desire.

He took her in his arms and kissed her savagely. She remained docile in his embrace. Then she stirred, and pushed against his chest. His arms relaxed. She took a half step backward, avoiding his gaze.

"No, Hal."

He pinioned her arms. "Listen to me. I don't know how these things happen. Up till now, I've taken my fun as I found it—and I'm not denying I've found my share. But I fell in love with you the moment I saw you. Maybe even when I heard your voice. Can you understand that? Can you believe it?"

A happy smile drifted briefly across her features and was gone. "I can believe it, Hal, but please under-

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stand, it just can't work. We're not for each other. Please don't say you love me, or even think it." She stepped back and suddenly became businesslike. "By the way, did you ever get through to Earth?"

"Everything's going to be all right," Hal lied. "But, Myna, I *do* love you. It's as simple as that. Everything else is unimportant."

She started to answer, but before she could Hal circled his arms around her waist and pulled her to him.

"Myna, darling, listen. We have no way of knowing whether we will ever get out of this or whether, now that we have found each other, we will both end this way. Either way, we have little time left to share quietly. For the moment, let it be enough to understand that we love each other and want each other."

He kissed her again, hard. Then, stooping, he placed an arm behind her knees and moved toward the bedroom. He took one step and froze. The burden lifted from his arms and the form vanished, leaving him standing, legs outstretched—his arms cradling empty air.

For one moment of eternity he stood there, motionless, with nothing but the whisper of death in his ear. Then he acted. He bolted for the wall, grabbed the red handle and pulled. A faint hum told him the magnetic field was flowing through the ship. Unsteadily, he lurched toward the chair and slumped into it.

He knew now that Myna was a Trodite. He knew that when he had lifted her into his arms, his crepe-soled shoes had broken her ground and she had been unable to maintain her form.

Hal clenched his fists and dug them into his eyes. She was the fifth column, the advance agent of the Trodites. She could not leave, nor could she do any harm. She was just here. Under the circumstances there was no decision to make. He could only hang on, wondering what was going on outside—not even knowing what was going on inside the ship. Or inside himself. He stood up, took a deep breath, and struggled to put the thing out of his mind.

Hal went to the radio and threw on the switch. "Earth Satellite 326-GC calling Earth Headquarters, signal red." He repeated the call over and over and received no answer. Then faintly he caught the voice of the Trodite coming in. It was not as calm and

purposeful as it had been before.

"Your message is being blanketed. No help can possibly get through. I have told you we have the means to effect an entry—but if you force us to use it, you will regret it. Do as I say. Switch off the repellant field. This is your last warning."

"You talk big, buster." Hal gripped the microphone until his knuckles showed white. "But you know as well as I do that you haven't got it. You'll never make it in here, because your little fifth column is exposed and dematerialized."

The Trodite's answering curses told Hal that he'd been right. Myna had been their only chance. At the moment they were checkmated. He relaxed a little.

He switched off the radio, then decided against it and opened it again. He walked to a port and looked out at the vast empty darkness.

Suddenly the radio came crashing to life. Voices spilled from the loudspeakers and filled the room. He rushed to the set and turned down the volume. Military orders were being snapped coolly, efficiently. Earth voices, familiar orders! The wonderfully efficient way voices criss-crossed the spaces, ordering, reporting, commenting.

Hal wanted to speak to them but restrained himself. Obviously, they were in the midst of an action. They would contact him when they were ready. He followed the progress of the battle by ear, and formed a remarkably accurate picture of what was going on. It was like playing chess blindfolded. The Trodites were being surrounded, dematerialized, held. Finally the recall to formation sounded and after a short interval, he heard the call.

"General James Doran, commanding Earth Task Force Counter, calling Earth Satellite 326-GC."

"Satellite 326-GC, Lieutenant Russell commanding, calling General Doran. I read you loud and clear, sir. Do you have orders for me, sir?"

"Is everything all right aboard, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Deactivate your repellant field. Your replacement will come aboard."

"General, I have a Trodite on board."

"What?" The reaction was explosive.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, why the devil didn't you report that at

once? Are you in full control of your ship?"

"Yes, sir. She came aboard in the guise of a refugee."

"She?"

"Yes, sir, it's a girl. But the internal magnetizer is in operation. She is dematerialized."

"We'll be in further contact with you directly; in the meantime maintain your present precautions. Out."

Now that the crisis was over, the deadening ache in Hal's breast returned. How could he have fallen so violently in love? So quickly, so completely? A Trodite gimmick that in some way played on his emotions?

The radio broke his reverie. "Lieutenant Russell, this is General Doran."

"Yes, sir."

"There are your orders. Reduce your repellant power to half. You will be surrounded, at your perimeter, by Squadron A. Proceed to Atom Field in Old Nevada. Upon arrival, deactivate your repellant and land. Squadron A, supplemented by the local base force, will cover your ship and bring you under the control of the electrical disbursement units. Upon receiving the final signal, deactivate the internal magnetizer and open your hatch.

"Are these orders taped and do you understand?"

"They are taped, sir, but I'm afraid I do not quite understand." He was puzzled by the elaborate procedure just outlined.

"Which part is not clear, Lieutenant?"

"I—I don't quite know."

"Lieutenant, I am not in the habit of giving reasons for my orders."

"Yes, sir."

"In this case, considering the ordeal which you have just come through and must still undergo, I shall give you some of the background."

Hal didn't like the sound of the "still undergo" bit.

"Lieutenant, you still have a Trodite aboard. It can materialize in any form it chooses. You say it boarded you as a girl. It might rematerialize as a man, or a claw. If it should appear and gain control of your ship, it could switch on the repellant force, which would hold us off. I'm not at all anxious to have one of our satellites fall into Trodite hands."

Hal was stunned at the idea that Myna could return as a man. He couldn't bring himself to believe it. But he knew it was true.

The General continued.

"Should your captive not materialize and surrender at once, we will vaporize the craft and destroy the Trodite. It is imperative for your safety that you jump clear at once. We may have to act on the split second."

Hal didn't like the implications.

"Sir, it will take me several minutes to break away from the ship. If the blast should be necessary, it would probably occur almost as soon as I open the hatch."

"I'm afraid that's right, son." General Doran's voice was sad and final.

Hal swallowed. "I see, sir. Message understood."

"All right, Lieutenant. Proceed. Out."

Hal prepared to carry out his orders. He spun the rheostat, reducing the repellant power, and then threw the main motor switch. The slight rocking of the ship indicated the surge of power. He scanned the dials on the crowded control panel, and threw the handle forward. The satellite increased speed gradually. It pulled away from the planet and out into space. Several revolutions later it picked up its escort and headed for Earth.

The next several hours were the tough ones. Once the information had been fed into the master board, the journey was computer-controlled. Hal had time to think. His return to Earth, recently the one event he had been looking forward to so enthusiastically, was at the moment looming as the end of his life. Even if he could escape utter disintegration, he would have to live the rest of his life remembering what had happened. He couldn't understand it and had stopped trying to. He only knew that somehow he had lost a part of himself, he had given Myna a vital part of his will to live. He still loved her.

The satellite slowed, circled briefly and hovered over the pre-selected landing site. As the moment drew closer, it tortured him to think that when they reached Earth, what had been Myna would be completely destroyed, except in his memory.

There was only one way she could save herself, and possibly him, from oblivion. He decided to chance talking to her once more. He released the internal magnetic field. But he kept his hand ready to pull it again, in case she should materialize in a dangerous form.

Thirty seconds later she ap-

peared. She was as voluptuous and desirable as ever. She started to walk towards him.

"Stay where you are," he said, as sternly as he could. "I want to talk to you." Her beauty was agonizing. Only a slim thread of reason kept him from rushing to her.

"Hal, forgive me. I never intended to hurt you."

Hal laughed bitterly. "I suppose you and your pals just wanted to play tiddleywinks. They were pretty upset when they found out you'd been exposed and that you couldn't help them get in."

Myna's eyes stared into his. "I never intended to help them. If I had wanted to deactivate the repellant field, I could have done it before you discovered I was a Trodite."

Hal was a little confused by the truth of her statement. "I—I don't understand." His eyes begged her for an explanation he could accept.

"Please believe me, Hal. They sent me to you as a spy, but I never meant to carry out their plan. I hoped that you would take me to Earth with you; that I could live there as an earthling, without anyone discovering the truth. It was my only hope of escaping from them. I am a Trodite, but we're not all enemies of Earth. There are those of us who feel more loyalty to you than to those Trodites who want to conquer the universe."

Hal tried hard not to believe her. "A touching story. I suppose you found it very amusing when I fell in love with you."

"Oh, no, Hal. Couldn't you see that I felt the same—that I loved you?"

He looked at her full, red mouth and all his resistance gave out. He pulled her to him. He could feel her soft breasts like red hot coals against him.

"Myna, Myna," he whispered, "I'm a fool—but I believe you."

She looked up at him. Her lips burned into his. After several minutes the slight swaying of the ship brought him back to reality.

"Darling," he said, "we're headed for Earth. When we get there you'll have to surrender."

"I know. What will they do to me?"

Hal hesitated. "I don't know. You'll be a prisoner of war." They sat in silence for a long while.

"Hal, I can give them all the major points of the Trodite battle plan."

Hal's face lit up. "Darling, that's wonderful. They'll probably agree to release you in my custody, and we can get married, and . . ." His face became pale. "You won't dematerialize, will you?"

Myna turned away without answering.

Hal persisted. "They will have to keep you prisoner if there's any possibility . . ." He buried his face in his hands. "I'd rather be dead than have to lose you again."

Myna turned to him and gently stroked his hair.

"I love you so," she said, "I can't bear to see you so unhappy. Hal, there is an answer."

"What is it? You've got to tell me."

For a moment she was undecided, but the love and concern in his face made her decision for her.

"It's a closely guarded secret among the Trodites. If they ever find out I've revealed it, they'll devote themselves completely to my destruction." She took a deep breath and went on. "If a Trodite is exposed to simple X-rays while in a materialied form, he cannot dematerialize or change his form ever again."

Hal stared at her, knowing what this information could mean to them. "Myna, don't you realize that now there's nothing that can keep us apart?"

She hesitated, then smiled. "Yes, darling, nothing in the universe."

Hal went to the radio.

"Earth Satellite 326-GC calling Earth Headquarters, signal red."

This time the answer came almost immediately. Hal could hear perfectly.

"Earth Headquarters calling Lieutenant Russell, Satellite 326-GC. I read you loud and clear, Lieutenant. Go ahead."

Hal winked at Myna.

"Please inform General Doran that captive Trodite will materialize and surrender. Said captive is also willing to give vital information regarding Trodite battle plan. Also, please request General Doran to have X-ray equipment waiting at Atom Field. Over and out."

Hal's smile threatened to take over his face as he pulled Myna to him.

"Tell me," he said, "do you think ninety days are enough for a honeymoon?"

THE END

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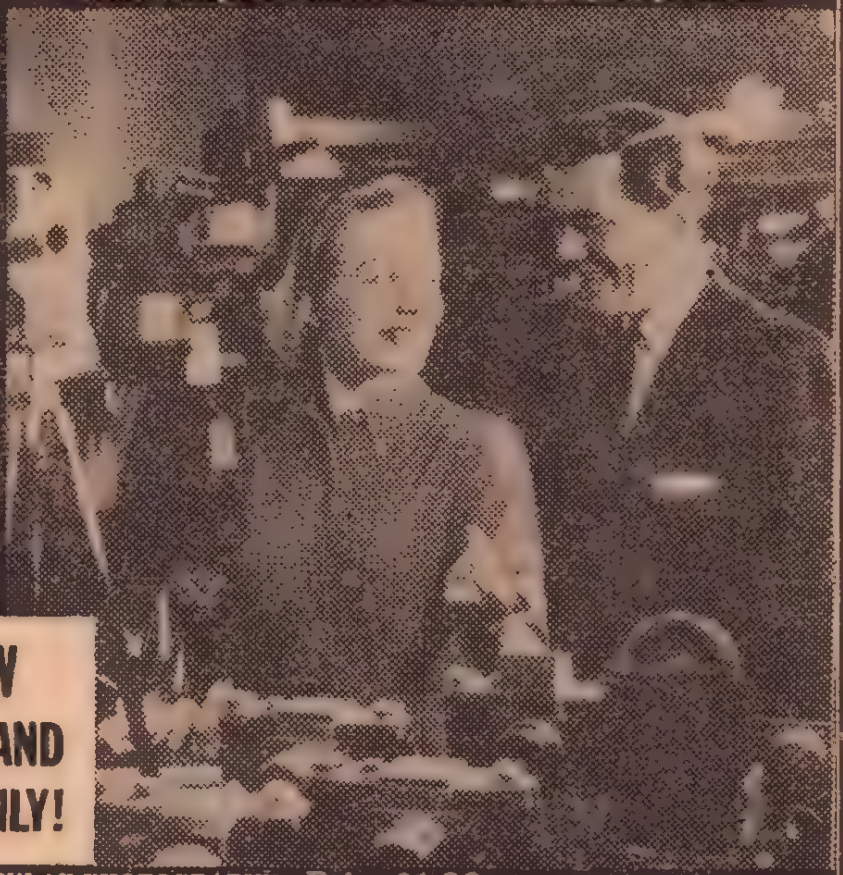

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THE SECRET OF THE SHAN

By RICHARD GREER

The Shan of Yetun-Vey—on this planet a thousand light-years from Earth—was a crook, a nogoodnick, a bounder, a general all-around bum. In fact he stole every virtue the Terrans figured they alone had the right to practice.

DOUG OVERMAN lay flat on his belly on the roof of the low building, inhaling the odd aromas of the ancient city of Yetun-Vey. In the street below, he could hear the clatter of heavy hooves as the Shan's Guard trotted through the streets on their unicorn-like mounts.

Overman was both worried and angry—and a little frightened.

Damn it, he thought, *I didn't ask to get involved in the petty tribal wars of a planet a thousand light-years from Sol!*

An officer of the Guard gobbled something in Yetuni. The clatter of the mount's hooves stopped. What was going on? Had he been spotted?

Overman cursed his lack of knowledge of Yetuni. If he could only understand what they were saying. If they knew he was on the roof—

He had to find out; he had to take the chance. He would never have dared to peek over the edge of the roof in broad daylight, but the eternally moonless night of the planet was only dimly illuminated by the flickering torches in the streets below. He crawled over and peered down between two of the carved gargoyles that decorated the roof's edge.

In the red-orange of the torchlight below, he could see the troop of guardsmen, still mounted. Their officer was talking to an unmounted man—a peddler of some sort. The peddler was gabbling and gesturing, shrugging his shoulders, spreading his hands.

In spite of the fact that

"When I'm through you'll look like a native."

Overman didn't understand the language, it was obvious that the peddler was disclaiming any knowledge of the Earthman's whereabouts.

The officer gobbled again, and the troop rode off down the narrow, cobblestoned streets.

Overman lay back flat on the roof and tried to think. What the devil was he going to do next? The whole mess was a mistake—a deadly mistake, however.

He had come to Sargon III as an anthropologist; the Earth base had sent letters of introduction to several of the Shans in this territory, and the native princes had seemed to be pleased to attract the interest of one of the all-powerful Earthmen.

Sargon III was a backward planet; the civilization had not evolved much above that of the city-states of ancient Greece. The natives were humanoid to a high degree; without close examination, it was impossible to tell one of the Yetuni, for example, from a Terran Polynesian.

Doug Overman had gotten along well with the people of Sargon until he had come to the city-state of Yetun-Vey.

The Shan of Yetun-Vey was a big, powerfully-muscled man who had greeted Overman cordially, but with a faint touch of suspicion in his dark brown eyes. Instead of being allowed to conduct his anthropological studies in freedom, as he had in the neighboring state of Gowa-Vey, Overman had constantly found a guard at his elbow.

"For your protection," the Shan had said, in his slightly accented English. Overman had not asked against what.

And then, only a few hours ago, he had been strolling through the court gardens, after carefully eluding his guard so that he could be alone. A light at a window had interested him, and he had strolled over, vaguely curious. And he had seen the revolvers. Cases of them, with cartridges, in a candle-lit room.

Instantly, he had known why the Shan of Yetun-Vey had been suspicious of him. Those guns could only have been stolen from the Earth base—or else some Earth criminal had sold them to him. Evidently, the Shan intended to use them against his neighboring enemy, the Shan of Ahnkiza-Vey.

Overman had walked quietly away. It was none of his business if one Shan wanted to fight another, and he wasn't

responsible for the Earth regulations that prohibited the selling of even such antiquated weapons as firearms to natives of backward planets.

And then had come the gobbling cry behind him. Overman knew enough of the alien language to recognize the order to "Kill the Earthling spy!"

They were after him now, and Overman knew why. The Shan thought he was a spy from the Earth base, or possibly, a spy for the Shan of Ahnkiza-Vey. No amount of pleading or protecting would do any good; the Shan would kill him and then look innocent when the Earth base finally got around to investigating. And that would be months from now. Besides, Doug Overman had gone into the native sections of the planet at his own risk; the government of Earth couldn't afford to protect every man who went into the interior because it would take too much time and effort. He was completely on his own.

Overman had fled from the palace of the Shan, barely escaping the hissing arrows from the crossbows of the guards. The city was his only hope for a while, but somehow he had to find a way to get out of Yetun-Vey.

He lay there on the roof, trying to figure a way out. He could move around at night, skulking in the shadows to keep away from the Shan's Guard, but when dawn came, he would have to be well hidden. With his blond hair and light skin, he would be spotted as an Earthman at five hundred yards. He would have to find a hiding place now.

But where was he to go? What was he to do? If only he'd brought a flyer—but that, too, was illegal. He had ridden by coach or on the backs of the unicorn-like *thegs*, that the natives used as riding animals. And now, he had no money; it had all been left behind at the Shan's palace. If only he hadn't been such a damned fool! Why hadn't he stayed in his room? Or why hadn't he left as soon as he had seen that the Shan wasn't exactly the friendly sort?

Simply because it had never occurred to him that anyone would think his presence was dangerous.

It was still early in the evening; around him, he could hear the faint chatter of the natives as they went about their business, the bounce of hand carts as they were pull-

ed clatteringly across the stone streets.

And then he heard another sound—the faint rasp of steel on stone! He jerked his head around just as a Guardsman lifted himself over the edge of the roof from a nearby building. A trap! The troop of Guards had only pretended to go away!

The Guardsman was peering around the roof. He was clearly silhouetted against the sky, but the roof was dark, and Overman realized that the soldier couldn't see him. But the man was only five feet away; he'd see his quarry any second now. Overman knew he had only one chance.

When the Guardsman looked away, to peer behind a nearby chimney-pot, Overman leaped to his feet and rushed the man. The soldier heard the noise and turned before Overman reached him. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, but by that time the Earthman was on him.

The Guardsman's loud yell was terminated suddenly as Overman's fist landed in the pit of his stomach. The Earthman followed up immediately with a crashing blow to the man's chin. The Guardsman collapsed.

But now there were other cries, and footsteps clattered across the roof of the nearby building.

Swiftly, Overman snatched the sword from the belt of the fallen soldier and jerked off his heavy cloak. Then he ran, vaulting over the edge of the building to another roof five feet below. Behind him, a torch blazed suddenly into life, and then another and another. Cries filled the air, a gobbling of Yetuni echoed in the night.

The roofs of the houses of Yetun-Vey were close together and flat, and the streets were narrow and crooked. Overman found it easy to leap across one of the narrow alleyways, no more than four feet wide. A crossbow bolt sang by his head and clattered against a distant wall.

Then, ahead of him, another soldier leaped out from behind a chimney. Overman almost ran into him before he could stop himself. The soldier's drawn sword slashed down in a murderous cut.

Overman had never handled a sword in his life, but the parry was almost instinctive. The weapon in his own hand came up. Steel rang against steel, deflecting the blow. The soldier swung his weapon back for another cut,

and left himself wide open for a simple thrust with the point. Overman's sword ran him through.

For a fraction of a second, the Earthman was startled at how easy it had been. The Yetuni had never discovered the use of a sword point; like the ancient Greeks and Romans, their training was entirely in the use of the edge.

Overman leaped over the body and kept going.

Then, quite suddenly, he came to a street. It was narrow, only about ten feet wide. But it was too far to jump across to the next roof. Behind him, the heavy sandals of the Guardsmen thumped on the roof.

He *had* to jump.

He slid the sword into his belt and leaped.

He missed the opposite roof by a good foot, and slammed into the wall, almost knocking his breath out. As he fell, his clutching fingers grasped the top of a window. Almost automatically, he swung himself in and landed in a heap inside the darkened room. For a moment, he was too dazed to move.

Then a frightened voice said something in Yethani. It was a woman—inside the room!

Instantly, Overman was on his feet, his sword in his hand. In the dimness of the room, he could see the girl cowering against the wall near a pile of sleeping furs. Through the window, he could hear the shouts of the soldiers.

He pointed the sword at the girl's throat and held his finger to his lips. "I know you can't understand English," he whispered harshly, "but you can understand this." He knew that he could never bring himself to kill her, but he hoped she didn't know that.

She gasped. Then she said: "You speak the English of the Earthmen! And they want to kill you?"

Overman was too startled to say anything.

She stood up from her bed, then, and said: "Trust me, please. I can send them away."

She went to the window. In her own language, she called to the soldier on the roof. "What is the cause of the clatter?"

"We chase an enemy of the Shan!" the soldier called. "We saw him come this way, but we have lost him."

"Ah! Then that was what I heard but a moment ago!" She pointed downward, to the street twenty feet below. "I heard someone fall. Then I heard a noise as of someone

limping. I think perhaps he hurt himself."

"Thanks unto you, gracious one."

"And to you, keeper of the peace."

The soldiers moved away, and, as their voices receded, Overman whispered: "What did you say to them?"

She told him, then asked: "Who are you?"

"Never mind. The less you know, the better off you'll be. I'll get out of here."

She nodded. "Very well. It is best. But wait! Your skin! It is too light! And your hair and clothes. That will never do!"

She drew the shutters of the window and struck a steel and flint tinder box. Then she lit the smoky oil lamp.

And then for a moment, they simply looked at each other.

She was tall and slender, with dark, softly waving hair. Her tanned skin glowed in the flickering light. Around her hips, she wore the folded indoor skirt of the Yetuni women. And, like all young women of her race, her full, round breasts were bare.

Evidently, she liked the firm chin and intelligent blue eyes of the blond Earthman, for she smiled before she turned to a low table near the wall.

"I have a—how do you say it? Color? Stain? For the hair, you know."

"Hair dye," Overman said.

"Yes, so." She picked up a small bottle made of glazed and decorated porcelain. "This will do." Then she pointed to a small, almost invisible scar near her hairline. "From here, the hair comes out white. It is not—not—How do you say? It is not considered pretty."

"I see." Overman nodded.

The girl set to work. First she used the dye on his hair undiluted, changing it from yellow to almost black. Then she diluted it with water and rubbed it into his skin. She gave him one of the simple, wrap-around skirts that the Yetuni of both sexes wore, and he draped the cloak around his shoulder.

She looked him over. "I think now you will go as a Yetuni—except for your eyes. But there is nothing we can do. Let no one see your eyes." Then she pointed at the door. "And now, go. I have done all I can. I don't want to get into trouble—or to get my master and mistress into trouble."

Overman understood then why the girl had helped him; she was a slave, probably

taken from some neighboring nation. She would have no particular love for the Shan of Yetun-Vey. Had she been an Earth girl, Overman would have kissed her then, but the people of Sargon III regarded kissing as one of the most intimate and sacred acts between lovers. Even the attempt would be taken as a disgusting insult from a lascivious lecher. Overman could do no more than thank her verbally.

Minutes later, he was again on the streets of Yetun-Vey.

He walked slowly down the narrow passageways between the buildings, avoiding anyone who walked towards him, and keeping his head down, as though in deep thought. In the flickering torchlight, it was doubtful that anyone would see his blue eyes, but he didn't want to take any chances.

He was tired—so terribly tired. It was almost midnight, and he had spent most of the night running. His body felt as though it had been put through a wine press.

But where could he sleep? He couldn't get into an inn. Even if they didn't notice his eyes, how could he get by without speaking the language?

Besides, the streets were full of soldiers; mounted members of the Guard were at every corner. Overman would have to get out of the city; he would be safe nowhere else...

He headed for the nearest gate in the great wall that surrounded the city-state of Yetun-Vey.

Four hours later, Doug Overman realized he was trapped. Every gate was guarded; everyone who came in or went out was inspected carefully. There were three times the number of soldiers as usual, and the walls were both thick and high.

Yetun-Vey was one of the wealthiest of the city-states of Sargon III, and it had gained and kept its wealth because it was well fortified. And it was as hard to get out of as it was to get in.

Overman's head throbbed. He *had* to get away. And he had to get some sleep. Normally, he could easily have stayed awake much longer, but so much physical exercise and the slam on the head he had taken were beginning to tell on him.

It would be dawn soon. If he didn't get out before the sun rose . . .

He heard a humming sound in the sky and looked up.

He couldn't see a thing in the darkness of the sky, but he

knew what that humming was. A flyer! Someone was dropping an antigrav powered flyer to the Shan's palace in the center of the city!

It all fit. Some Earthman was smuggling arms into Yetun-Vey against the rules of the High Space Commission. And using a flyer was equally illegal, so it must be the same man. Unless, of course, it was the Commission Police coming to retake the armament.

In either case, Overman realized, he would have to get to the palace. If it were the Police, they could take him out of Yetun-Vey. If it were the gunrunner, it might be possible to steal his flyer or at least use the radiophone that was sure to be aboard it.

Determinedly, he set out for the palace, nearly a mile away.

Doug Overman walked very slowly through the grounds of the Palace of the Shan. Eluding the guards and getting in had been relatively simple; the palace was the last place they would expect him to come. Once inside, he had not tried to hide or skulk in the darkness, though he avoided the direct light of the torches that flickered from the wall sconces. His disguise, plus the soldier's cloak that he wore should be enough to protect him if he didn't act suspiciously.

The question was, how to get to the roof? The palace was not tall; the architecture of Sargon III did not run to great heights. But even the three levels of the palace was enough to put a barrier between himself and the flyer. Climbing up the outer wall was out of the question. The rough-hewn stone offered plenty of handholds, but the torches illuminated it too brightly. And a man seen climbing up the wall of the palace would be out of place no matter what he looked like. That was no good.

He decided that the best way was the bold approach. They hadn't suspected that he would come inside the palace grounds; how much less would they think he would walk boldly into the palace itself?

It worked. He picked one of the huge doors and simply walked in, right past the guard who was standing at rigid attention. The guard didn't even look at him.

He reached the second floor by the simple expedient of walking up the stairway. Was it going to be as easy as all that?

As he walked by one of the rooms, he heard voices—in

English! He stopped, listening.

"We will get the girl to talk." It was the queerly accented voice of the Shan. "She was the last one to see the other Earthling alive; we have a witness who saw him go into her window, although no one has seen him since."

"She'd better talk," said another voice; "if that guy gets away, the whole thing is washed up."

The second voice was obviously that of the gunrunner. But it was the import of their words that struck Overman. The girl who had befriended him had been captured!

The Shan's voice gabbled in the Yetuni language, and then the girl's voice—frightened and shaking.

"She claims she knows nothing at all," said the Shan in English. "She has never seen the Earthman." There was a pause, then he continued: "However, a little torture should loosen up her tongue."

"Go ahead," said the gunrunner. "We've got to find that guy." ...

Overman stood there, indecisive for a moment. If he went ahead to the roof, he might be able to get away unseen in the flyer. But that would mean leaving the girl to be tortured. He hesitated only for an instant. Then he drew the sword at his side and eased open the door.

Both the gunrunner and the Shan had their backs to him, but when the door opened, they turned. The Earthman had a beam pistol at his hip, but he didn't attempt to draw it. Overman looked just like another of the Yetuni guards to him.

The Shan knew better. He saw Overman's blue eyes and recognized him immediately under the brown skin stain.

He shouted something and reached for his sword hilt.

Overman was already in action. Before the gunrunner could realize what was happening, the flat of Overman's sword crashed against his temple. The gunrunner dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Then Overman turned his attention to the Shan. The Yetuni ruler was fast and still fairly young. In addition, he was an expert swordsman. Overman knew he stood no chance against an expert who knew how to use the point. But the Yetuni swordplay used the edge, not the point. They used the weapon in wide swings, to cut and hack, not to stab. They had not yet learned that the point is by far the

most useful and deadliest part of the weapon.

Coming in close, Overman parried an edge cut and lunged forward. The Shan danced back out of the way, somewhat puzzled by the Earthman's swordplay.

Overman stepped in again as the ruler brought up his weapon for a backhand cut.

Overman didn't want to kill the Shan; he knew that if he did, his chances of getting out alive were practically nil. He aimed his thrusts, therefore, at the Yetuni's sword-arm, not at his heart.

When the Shan lifted his weapon for a third cut, Overman leaped in, thrusting for the shoulder. The point of his sword went into the flesh, and the Shan's sword spun across the room, released from nerveless fingers on the downswing.

"Don't move an inch!" Overman snapped, holding the point of his weapon at the ruler's heart. The Shan froze. "Get the Earthman's gun," Overman told the girl.

Quickly, she ran over to the fallen gunrunner and pulled the beam pistol from its holster. She handed it to Overman, who lowered his sword point from the Shan's heart at the same time he aimed the beam gun. "Wake up the Earthman," he commanded the Shan. The Yetuni ruler, staring at the deadly beam gun, obeyed. He slapped the gunrunner a few times, and the Earthman finally groaned and shook his head. Within a few minutes, he was fully awake.

"All right," said Overman, "we're going up to the roof. The first one to act up gets a beam."

They went out of the room and climbed the stairway in silence. When they reached the roof, Overman noticed that there were four guards around the flyer.

"Order them to leave," he told the Shan. "No tricks now; the girl can tell what you're saying."

The order was given, and the guards obediently turned and headed for the other stairway across the roof.

Overman marched the two men toward the flyer; at the same time, twisted the intensity control knob on the beam pistol down to minimum. When they were standing by the flyer, Overman fired twice, knocking them unconscious without killing them.

"Help me get them into the baggage compartment," he told the girl. "Quickly!"

When they were safely stowed away, he and the slave

girl climbed inside. Overman activated the antigravs, and the little ship lifted into the air.

Then he picked up the radiophone and called the High Space Commission. After listening, the officer said: "We've been on that guy's trail for months. Good work. We'll have to release the Shan to his people, of course; he's not subject to Earth law. But we'll have a ship there in an hour to get the guns.

"Meanwhile, how would you like to do us another favor? We've had an operative there in Yetun-Vey for several weeks, trying to get a line on what the Shan was doing. She's been disguised as a native, and—"

"She?" Overman jerked his head around to look at the girl. She smiled.

"That's right; you're a good guesser, Overman. I was afraid you'd be suspicious when I showed you the dye. I didn't know who you were, so I couldn't reveal myself."

"What's going on there?" said the officer's voice from the headquarters of the High Space Commission.

"I was just about to tell you that I have already picked up your operative."

"Already? Say, you're a good man; we could use you!"

"Me? No thanks! I'll just go on being an anthropologist; I get in enough trouble that way. Besides, it was just luck." He looked again at the girl. "Damned good luck!"

When he hung up, he frowned for a moment. "By the way, what did you say your name was?"

The girl began laughing so hard she could hardly get the words out. And then she was kissing him so hard that it didn't matter. **THE END**

AND NO REFUND

In Birmingham, England, a man was operated upon successfully for lung cancer but he rolled off the operating table on to the floor and was killed.

AND THEN HE WAS TWO

By IVAR JORGENSEN

When a man leads a solid, respectable life, he should certainly have the right to die and go to heaven like other people. Curtiss Hamilton was such a man and what happened to him is a lesson for all of us with a clear-cut moral: Don't start for heaven half-dead.

CURTISS HAMILTON shook the cobwebs out of his mind and tried to reconstruct his movements since leaving Mrs. Murphy's boarding house. Mrs. Murphy had said good morning and advised him as to weather conditions.

Then he'd walked down the street, turned right onto Main, and—wham! A sudden soft shock, as though an enormous soft pillow had fallen on him, blotting out every contact with consciousness. There had been no warning, no noise, no pain. And yet something had happened . . . something that caused him to lose track of things completely.

Now there was a gap, and as he examined the situation, he wasn't even sure how much time he had to account for. It seemed as though only minutes since he'd turned the crucial corner, and yet—it could have been years. Amnesia! That had to be it. There had been no accident. It was just this inability to remember.

Now he felt a little easier. An intelligent man should be able to lick a simple case of amnesia. The important thing was not to panic.

He looked around. He could see the downtown section of a small city. He watched the people coming and going along the main thoroughfare, and his attention continued on a short, plump man in a loose-fitting suit who walked easily up the center of the sidewalk.

He was a pleasant-looking

They obviously wanted him to move on.

fellow, and apparently well-known in the community, since every few feet someone would greet him with a cheery good-morning. He nodded to those who addressed him, and strolled casually on his way.

The scene was vaguely familiar to Curtiss and the people on the streets did not seem to be strangers. But he had been in so many towns and villages. The important thing was to find out just where he was. The solution was simple. Ask.

"I beg your pardon," he began, "but I wonder if you could tell me . . ." He stopped as the stranger gave him a queer look and hurried away.

He made another selection. "Ah, there. You, sir! Would you be so kind as to . . ."

Again he was brought up short by the rapid departure of the native. Never in his life had he seen such ill-mannered, close-mouthed creatures, and he was becoming distinctly annoyed.

He gave up trying and glanced up and down the street; he was looking for something and realized what it was when he spotted the plump, pleasant man now sitting on a bench by the bus stop. The man was not waiting for a bus because several had passed, and still the man remained seated.

He inspected the man closely, feeling sure he knew him. He moved toward the bench, patting his pockets absently in search of a smoke. The plump man turned his head, smiled, and extended a cigar case.

Curtiss felt sudden shock. The case—it was his own! No question about it. His father had given him that silver case years before, and he had carried it ever since.

Then, in deepening panic, an incredible conviction had struck him. The plump man was not a stranger, but Curtiss Hamilton. He was staring at *he himself* sitting there on that bench.

As he turned, somewhat like a trapped rabbit, he saw a tall gray-haired man approaching, flanked by the two people Curtiss had tried to question a few moments before. They seemed nervous, but the gray-haired man was more sure of himself.

"I imagine you're somewhat confused," he said gravely.

"Confused is hardly the word! I don't get any of this. What am I doing here? Where am I? What is this place?"

"Let me put it this way," the man said gently; "you are not *down there* any more."

Curtiss tried desperately to comprehend. It took a while for the message to sink in, then Curtiss asked, "You mean I'm not on—?"

"That's right. Not on earth. Not in your world."

Curtiss strove for control and got back some of his confidence as the habits of a lifetime impelled him to cut right through to the heart of the matter and build logically from there. "Am I alive?"

The white-haired man cleared his throat nervously. "Well, not exactly," he said.

Curtiss gulped. The words had a double effect. They gave him shocking knowledge and also seemed to straighten out his usual perspective. And he realized he was looking at the plump man on the bench from far away; that the man was back in the world he himself had left.

"That man—*down there*—he's me—I—he's— dammit! Tell me!"

"Now, now, Mr. Hamilton," the gentleman soothed, "that *is* you but you're up here, also, and—well, neither of you is alive."

In mute desperation, Curtiss turned to the pair who were hovering in the background, but they shrank away and the gray-haired man went on. "There has been a mistake. I can't imagine how such a thing could have happened. Suppose you come on over to the Administration Building, and we'll talk things over."

"What Administration Building?"

"This whole area is the Reception Center. Over there, just before you come to the Main Gate, is the Administration Building. We'll see what we can do to straighten out this matter." He smiled encouragingly and moved off in the direction he had indicated.

It was a huge marble building and as they entered the people fell silent and moved out of the way. Finally, they came to the end of the great hallway and walked into a large office.

It was not luxuriously furnished but it gave the impression of imposing dignity. "This is my office," the white-haired man said and took his place behind the desk. Curtiss sat down in a chair obviously set there for such an occasion. He noted that the two nervous ones had vanished.

The white-haired man gently placed the tips of his outstretched fingers together and lightly rested his chin on the spire they formed. He seemed to be trying to find precisely the right words.

Curtiss spoke first. "If you're connected with this organization, I would be grateful if you would explain a few things. But first, I'll take this opportunity to tell you that my name is Curtiss Hamilton and I'm in the insurance game. At least, I think I am."

"To be sure. And under your rules—I mean not knowing much about the future—it must be a most diverting game, I should like to play some time. But then, what with conditions here being as they are—but let us get down to business. My name is Peter."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Peter. And your business?" Curtiss relaxed a little.

The man hesitated. "Well, of course, I started in the fish business. But now I'm sort of generally in charge. My major duties have to do with the Main Gate. And, Mr. Hamilton, we don't use the title *Mister*. You may just call me Peter."

"But you just called me 'Mister' Hamilton," Curtiss protested.

"Yes, but yours is a rather special case. Normally, you spend only a few minutes being processed and checked, and then you pass through the Main Gate. At that point, of course, your title of Mister would be dropped. As it is, you see, we are still in Reception."

Curtiss turned suddenly pale, yet couldn't bring himself to ask the obvious. "This Main Gate, Mist—I mean, Peter. What is it made of?"

"Well, the great bulk of it is genuine pearl, but we have a gold framework. And for the minor repairs which inevitably become necessary, we have been using lately a rather fine plastic which is almost indistinguishable from pearl."

Now, strangely, Curtiss Hamilton's fear vanished and anger took its place. "If you're the Peter I think you are, this whole procedure seems highly irregular. I've never been through this sort of thing myself, but a great number of my customers have, and they never hang around down there smoking cigars. I mean it's either one way or the other. They're either paying premiums or their families are collecting.

How can I be both here and there?"

"You'll remember I told you there had been a mistake. It was a collection error. It seems two pages in the collection book became stuck together, and the schedules were made up wrong. We caught it right away but unfortunately you had already been collected."

"Isn't there something definitely wrong with a system which can make mistakes like this one."

The old gentleman looked tired. "Mr. Hamilton, have you any idea of the size of this operation?"

"I suppose it must be pretty large."

"Can you guess at the number of collections we have made since this thing was started?"

"Rather considerable, I should say."

"Exactly. And in the entire time, this is the only error we have made. Isn't that remarkable, really?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Let me explain the system to you briefly."

"I wish you would."

Peter steepled his fingers. "As you know, your existence has been in two separate forms. Your common self, or body, and your special self, or spirit."

Curtiss nodded.

"So there are two departments involved. When the Book of Records shows that the time has come, the Department of Commons schedules the winding up of the bodily affairs of the subject, while the Department of Specials arranges for the collection of the spirit at the exact moment when Commons completes its work." Peter paused, then continued.

"In your case, Commons did not have you scheduled at all because you were not due at this time. But the Department of Specials went right ahead and collected your spirit, but Commons didn't touch your body."

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" Curtiss asked.

"I don't know. I really don't know," Peter answered, shaking his head and staring at the desktop.

"Well, something will have to be done. And in the meantime, sir, I intend to hold this department responsible for any loss I incur. Both Common *and* Special."

"I tell you what," Peter said, brightening suddenly, "why don't you just stay here in Reception until your time

comes. Then, you'll be admitted in the normal way."

"How long will that be?" Curtiss asked cautiously.

"Not very long. After all, you're on the very next page."

Curtiss thought it over. "It would be very inconvenient. Not to mention lonely. After all, my friends are either beyond the gate, or down with the Commons."

"Oh," Peter added, shuddering slightly, "deep down below."

"Yes, I suppose so. The point is that none of them are here. On the other hand, I suppose I should try to cooperate, and if it just means a short wait, we might work it that way."

"Then you'll do it?" Peter asked eagerly.

"Before we conclude the actual agreement, I should like to make sure I understand things. You say my name is on the very next page."

"You have my word," Peter said solemnly.

"And how fast do you go through the pages? Can I expect a call some time tonight, or in the morning, perhaps?"

"Well, no, not quite that quickly. You see, these books are different from the ones you're used to, and the writing is much finer."

"Do you mean it might take a few days?" Curtiss asked.

"Oh, it would certainly be all of that," Peter said, averting his gaze.

"Well, how long would it take, for Pete's sake? No disrespect intended, you understand."

Peter was clearly uncomfortable. "In the way you measure time," he said quietly, "which is quite different, I assure you, from our own standards, it would be about twenty years."

"Twenty years!" Curtiss shouted, jumping to his feet. "That's ridiculous! I won't stand for it. Who is your immediate superior here? I'll speak with him."

"Now, now, Mr. Hamilton, please calm yourself. The only one above me who is qualified to handle things like this is right at the top. I'm sure you wouldn't want to disturb Him; He's really so busy."

"You're darn right I want to disturb Him. That's the only way to get things done, anyhow. Go right to the top."

Peter passed his hand wearily over his brow. "Look, Mr. Hamilton," he said,

"we're both very tired. Suppose we take a break for an hour. I need the time to think, and there are several personages I would like to consult with."

Curtiss mulled it over. "Okay. We'll do it your way. But just a minute—you mean one ordinary, Earth-type hour, don't you? None of these celestial time-reckonings?"

"Oh, definitely. One sixty-minute, Earth-type hour," Peter said, standing up. "Just feel free to wander about and take in the sights. But of course you won't go near the Main Gate. Off limits, you know."

"Check."

Curtiss meandered about the place, thinking. He was glad he had stood up for his rights. Peter was obviously anxious that this matter go to no higher authority. Well, that was all right—as long as some equitable solution was found. The thought of his body running around, doing business as usual without him, was repugnant in the extreme. What would Mrs. Murphy think? All of a sudden it became very important to him what Mrs. Murphy would think. She was a widow whose husband had left her very little.

His thoughts turned from his own predicament to the position the dear lady would find herself in. He had never told her how he felt. To be exact, he hadn't known himself how he felt, until now he realized that his foremost thoughts were of her. He smiled sardonically. Every day he saw her in the morning and in the evening, and she fussed at him and scolded him for not being more careful of his health. He had always thought that he was annoyed by her continuous attentions. Now he realized they had become a large part of his life. He missed her.

He considered waiting out his time here in Reception. After all, in twenty years on Earth there was always an element of risk. A chance that something might go awry and, when his time finally did come, he might not land back up here at all. A small chance, to be sure, considering his habits and the watchful eye of Mrs. Murphy . . . but a chance just the same.

As thoughts of Mrs. Murphy and her bustling, ample figure flashed again through his mind, he came to a decision. He would demand to be sent back. He would use up

the full twenty years. They would be the warm, mellow, comfortable years.

Curtiss strolled aimlessly, rehearsing the coming interview with Peter. He would be calm, but firm. Polite, but unyielding. He smacked a fist into his hand as he mentally emphasized a particular point, and was just reaching a most satisfying conclusion, when the sound of a familiar voice caught his ear.

"Mrs. Murphy!" he shouted. "Am I ever glad to see you!"

He noticed then that she was accompanied by the same two with whom he had first tried to strike up a conversation. They had been walking with her, leading her toward the Administration Building, and chatting. At the sight of him they tried to hustle her away, but he blocked their path. They shrank back, hiding behind her capacious figure.

"What on earth—I mean what in heaven—are you doing here?" Curtiss demanded.

"I'm just arriving, Mr. Hamilton," she replied. "Heart attack, I think. But I don't understand, I just saw you, not five minutes ago, back there. And there was nothing wrong with you."

"There's been a dreadful mixup. At the moment I'm not sure whether I'm coming or going."

"I knew it," she said, pressing her lips together. "The times I've told you that you shouldn't ought to go round without a hat. But you wouldn't listen. Fie! All men are alike."

"Dear Mrs. Murphy! It has nothing at all to do with wearing a hat. They made a mistake and I'm caught in the middle. I'm in two places at once."

"Nothing's bad as ends up good," she consoled him. "I've got to be on my way. Checking in, they call it. But never you worry, when I'm all registered legal and proper, I'll soon get to the bottom of your trouble and we'll have you right side up in no time. I always told you you needed a good woman to look after you!"

"Thank you, dear lady, thank you." Curtiss could think of nothing else to say. The sweet thing just didn't understand at all, but she could not be blamed. It *was* very confusing. He stepped aside and watched her disappear into the haze surrounding the Administration Building.

Now he had to think the matter through all the way

from the beginning—but he had no time. His hour was up, and he was due back in Peter's office. He trudged slowly up the path, racking his brain, seeking the answer. But all he could think of was Mrs. Murphy.

Peter was waiting for him. "Have you been thinking, Mr. Hamilton?"

"Every minute," Curtiss assured him, "every blessed minute."

"And have you come to any conclusions?"

"No, sir, I have not," Curtiss answered. "As a matter of fact, things are so involved and mixed up that I have decided, sir, to leave the decision to you. If you think it best that I return to Earth for the rest of the twenty years, I'll be glad to cooperate. Or if you think it would be better for me to sign in here, I'll do that. Whatever you say will be all right with me."

Peter drummed nervously on the desk. "I wish it were that simple. You see, we are essentially a collection unit. We keep records, organize the operation and collect the proceeds—but we have no machinery for returning any of the collections."

"Well, that settles it then," Curtiss said, brightening. "I'll just have to sign in here and pass through the Main Gate."

"M-m-m—no, I'm afraid that's not possible either. As long as the common portion, or body, is not deactivated, the spirit can't be accepted. Long ago, before my own time, there were one or two exceptions to the rule, but such a thing is no longer possible."

Curtiss frowned, pursing his lips. "Ah, I've got it!" he said happily. "Just deactivate the body—hit it with a truck—and I'll sign right in."

Peter shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid not. Let me show you this." He walked over to the wall and pulled down a huge chart. It was a very detailed arrangement of figures and elements, all joined and intertwined with lines of all descriptions. Dotted lines, thick lines, thin dashes, all wound their way through the mass of figures connecting various groupings. Black print overlaid by printings of many colors combined to create an almost undecipherable entanglement.

"This is the basic, elemental chart," Peter explained. "It shows the different elements and their proper proportions. As you know, many

of these components are found in the common human form. As each body is deactivated, it naturally returns its elements to the general fund on Earth. From this general fund, they are withdrawn to make up the new commons, or bodies. Do you follow?"

"In a vague sort of way," Curtiss said, squinting at the fine print.

"You can understand that if the elements contained in one common were returned to the General Fund before they were due, it would throw the entire process."

"You mean one little body could make such a difference?" Curtiss asked incredulously.

"You have to figure the cumulative effect," Peter answered gravely. "It multiplies as time goes on, until it grows to diastrous proportions."

"I can't understand all these figures, but it seems to me it shouldn't be much of a job to correct a little mistake. Why not bring the body up here and store it someplace? Simply get rid of it."

"No, no, no," Peter cried in horror, "that wouldn't do at all. First of all, it would create a serious shortage when its final payment became due—and moreover, it is scheduled to make continuing elemental contributions during the next twenty years."

"How much of a production would it be for one of you fellows to just create the elements you're short and dump them in place of the body? Come, come, sir, surely that would hardly be beyond you."

Peter sighed and walked slowly back to his desk. He sat down. Curtiss took the seat opposite.

Finally he spoke. "You have no comprehension, Mr. Hamilton, of the complexity of the affair. Creation as such is limited to the Boss alone. Now He had visualized this creation business as sort of a one-shot deal. One big production, and that would be it. And that's the way it turned out. As you know, from that time to this, the cycle merely repeats itself—no new creation has been necessary. It's been just a matter of delivery and collection. All this, as I say, has been so until recently."

"You mean it's been changed?" Curtiss asked, surprised.

Peter nodded silently. "I suppose," he said, after a slight pause, "you could hard-

ly blame them. Things had been going along smoothly for so long that they just naturally got lax."

"Who got lax?"

"Security. They keep tabs on the Fallen Ones, and counter every move their leader, Lucifer, thinks up. A mighty good job they've done, too. One hundred percent. But then recently he slipped over a fast one. You're familiar with the term?"

"Quite," Curtiss assured him.

"What he did," Peter continued, "was to slip into the worldly state and leave a few scraps of paper strategically placed with several formulas on them. As he anticipated, these various formulas were pooled, and the humans who had acquired them were enabled to devise a truly fantastic power . . . they called the gadgets that they built *'A-bombs,'* meaning *'atom.'* Later they improved the product (Lucifer followed up his advantage, you see), and called them *'H-bombs,'* meaning *'hydrogen.'* Some of the wiser ones called them by their true name, *'Hell bombs.'* "

"I always suspected the Devil had a hand in those things, Curtiss said, "but I don't see what that has to do with me."

"The fact is, these bombs started blowing elements around so viciously that Earth was left short in her accounts. Several proposals were made as to what could be done to counteract the disaster. It was at first suggested that we send units out into space to gather the elements and redeposit them—but this procedure was regarded as too inefficient and wasteful. So we finally prevailed upon the Boss to start up a very limited creation program. We built a processing plant, where we receive the quota of new creation regularly. We deposit these to the account and square things up."

Curtiss said. "I think the story is very interesting, but you must understand, sir, that I am primarily concerned at the moment with *my* status. I would like to get an immediate ruling on this. And if you're unable to give one, I suggest that we move to the higher echelons and get a top-level decision."

"Please be patient, Mr. Hamilton. You see, the point to my story is that since the new creation plant went into production, the bombs have been going off in such in-

creasing numbers that we are working at the very limit of capacity trying to keep things even. We couldn't spare one single element."

"Can't you just ask for an increased allotment?" Curtiss asked.

"Oh, dear, no," Peter replied. "You have no idea how angry the Boss was when we first wanted him to resume creating. Things were upset here for months. Maybe you noticed the weather?"

"It was pretty bad," Curtiss conceded.

"You can see the spot we're in. If the Boss should find out about this, I just dread to think what might happen."

"But look here," Curtiss protested, "why should I bear the brunt of the foul-up? It doesn't seem fair to ask me to assume the burden of your error."

"You have a very definite point, there," Peter said unhappily.

Curtiss stood up. "I'm not a hard man," he said, "but after all, right is right. I'm afraid I'll have to insist on being taken to the top."

Peter was about to reply, when there was a rustle at the door and he looked up. "Yes?" he queried.

"Someone to see you, sir," the person in the doorway said.

"Well, I can't see anybody now," Peter waved him away. "I'm extremely busy."

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Go away," Peter groaned.

The person turned to go, but was brushed aside by the generous figure of the woman who bustled into the room.

"Mrs. Murphy, isn't it?" Peter said, rising.

"How do you do," she greeted him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't available to welcome you, but I trust my assistants made you comfortable? You are all processed, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, to be sure," she said. "I've been through the Gate and everything. I secured a pass from a very nice gentleman so I could come out here and see you. I understand you've been giving Mr. Hamilton a hard time."

"I wouldn't put it exactly that way, Mrs. Murphy—we have just been trying to straighten out a slight difficulty. By the way, what is your interest in the matter?"

Mrs. Murphy looked at Curtiss, and her big brown eyes held a depth of sympathy and understanding that brought a lump to his throat. Then she turned her atten-

tion to Peter and said, "I'm interested in simple justice, sir. Would you be with me on that?"

"Certainly, yes, yes, of course," Peter answered, hastily.

"Good. Well now, suppose you gentlemen sit down and tell me what this is all about, and maybe we can work out something." She motioned them both into their seats and drew up another chair for herself.

Peter felt that it was time for a small miracle, and accordingly, he caused the entire conversation between himself and Curtiss to be flashed into her understanding. It took her several moments to digest the facts, and then she spoke.

After getting the facts, she pondered a while, then said, "It seems like a very simple thing. Surely it's nothing to throw two grown men into a tizzy about."

"Nothing to get into a tizzy about?" Curtiss repeated indignantly.

"You have a solution, Mrs. Murphy," Peter suggested hopefully.

"As I get it," she said, "his spirit doesn't get in while his body is running around down there."

"Right," Peter nodded.

"And his spirit can't be sent back."

"Right."

"And he doesn't want to wait here, sort of half-and-half, for twenty years."

"Right!"

"And you can't bring his body up here, because there is a shortage of elements and you couldn't replace him."

"Right."

"All right, then, why don't you just bring his body up here, send it through the processing plant, and then you can deposit the stuff back where it belongs, as it becomes due, and you won't be out anything."

A smile creased the old man's face. "I believe it would work at that," he said. "Would you agree to that, Mr. Hamilton?"

"You mean that I could then be officially admitted beyond the Main Gate?" Curtiss asked.

"Absolutely."

"How long would it take? Earth-type time, I mean?" Curtiss felt that it was best to be cautious. This type of contract would run for a long, long time.

"I could arrange it immediately."

"Then I agree most heartily," Curtiss said.

Peter raised his hand to his head and closed his eyes. Clearly, this was the time for a miracle. A difficult miracle, but not impossible, since it did not require any special powers, like creation.

"It is done," he said.

Curtiss stood up. "You mean it's all done? I can go?"

Peter nodded. "Just one thing," he said. He reached into a drawer and pulled out some blanks. "Sign these. I'll fill them in later. We've kept you long enough."

Curtiss took the proffered pen and signed the papers.

Peter was smiling. "That does it," he said, stretching out his hand. "Glad to have you aboard."

Curtiss thanked him and shook his hand.

Mrs. Murphy stood beside him. She put her arm through his and led him to the door.

"Dear Mrs. Murphy," he said, looking into her eyes and patting her hand, "what would I do without you?"

"Well, you'll never have to find out now," she answered as they passed through the door. "And for heaven's sake, button your jacket. You'll catch your death."

"Yes, dear," he said. It was nice to be fussed over again.

THE END

"Just ignore him....He's that snoopy inventor in the next apartment."

Around The World In 20 Questions

This year, more vacation-minded Americans than ever before will go galloping over the globe. Are you one of the lucky ones? Even if you're not it's nice to be up on your geography. So here's a brush-up quiz. Take a pencil and draw a line through the wrong answer to each question. Count five points every time you win. A score of 90-100 makes you eligible for the Explorer's Club. 75 or over and you can find your way around without a guide. Under 75 puts you in the tourist class.

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1. The (Dardanelles-Bosporus) connect the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmora.
2. The Gulf of Aqaba is an arm of the (Red Sea-Arabian Sea).
3. The capitol of Oregon is (Portland-Salem).
4. (Greece-Albania) borders on Bulgaria.
5. The smallest republic in Europe is (San Marino-Andorra).
6. The world's largest inland sea is the (Aral-Caspian).
7. Of the two, the city closest to the South Pole is (Johannesburg-Buenos Aires).
8. Springfield is the capitol of (Illinois-Massachusetts).
9. The highest peak in the Western Hemisphere is (Mt. McKinley-Mt. Aconcagua).
10. Of these two, the island nearest the Equator is (Midway-Wake).
11. Karachi is the capitol city of (India-Pakistan).
12. The largest island in the Mediterranean is (Sardinia-Sicily).

13. (The Yellow Sea-The East China Sea) lies between Korea and China.

14. The Khyber Pass connects Pakistan and (Afghanistan-Tibet).

15. Guam is in the (Marshall-Mariana) Island Group.

16. Timbuktu is on the (Nile-Niger) River.

17. The largest Polar ocean is the (Arctic-Antarctic).

18. (Iraq-Iran) borders on Syria.

19. Longitude is measured from Greenwich (Connecticut-England).

20. Latitude is measured from the (North Pole-Equator).

(Continued from page 3)

Earth and almost destroys Mankind. We put Ed Valigursky to work on it and he did a magnificent job. The beast stands full-face, holding a terrified girl in one hand and in the other a lamppost he's broken off and intends to beat her brains out with. The Roman Colosseum stands in the background, there's a car tipped over on the left side and in the lower righthand corner, a smashed bicycle.

We took the cover in to Mr. Ziff, our boss, for a final okay. He thought it was tremendous but after a second look he said, "Better take out the bicycle."

That was of course impossible so, falling back on our vast knowledge of art, we explained why the bicycle just had to be there. The reasons were technical and hinged on perspective, color harmony, eye appeal, newsstand value, and other important points.

Mr. Ziff listened politely, understood each point and nodded in agreement. "You're right," he said. "It's a fine cover. You've done a great job."

"Thank you," we replied.

"A great job. Just don't forget to take out the bicycle."

So when you get your copy of "20 Million Miles To Earth," look in the lower right hand corner of the cover. You'll see paving bricks. But if you pry a few of them loose and lift them out, you'll find the clobbered two-wheeler. We buried it.

Oh, well—it wasn't much of a bicycle anyhow. —PWF

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

I have one gripe. You need more cartoons. Your stories are just great. Keep up the good quality.

Why don't you have a science quiz? It would be better than the quiz you are running, "Superlatives."

How about some Arthur C. Clarke stories?

Stephen Sala
Box 1
Osburn, Idaho

• *More cartoons coming up. How about a cartoon gallery? We put one in our second issue of* Dream World *and it went over with a bang. The feature may show up in* Amazing *and* Fantastic *any issue now.*

Dear Editor:

Serials, boy, how I love them. One in *Fantastic* and one in *Amazing*. Hark! What's this? Don Wilcox in *Fantastic?!* Terrific. How about a novel, one like "The Land of the Big Blue Apples" or "Cats of Kadenza?"

We want a sequel to "The Man From Yesterday." We want Tharn back. Maybe that'll reach Brown.

Donald Kent
3800 Wellington
Chicago 18, Ill.

• *Don Wilcox is really a great writer. We don't get much from him these days but maybe a few letters like this would get him back into the harness. After all, writers are human. They like bouquets.*

Dear Editor:

I am writing you in dissent about a reply you made to a letter by Kirby McCauley in the April 1957 issue of *Fantastic*. I don't agree with you on two points. I gather from your reply that you feel that digest size is better than pulp. I, on the other hand, feel that the pulp is the traditional size of science-fiction magazines. I feel that you don't get as much into one digest sized issue of *Fantastic* or *Amazing Stories* as you packed into a pulp or flat-sized issue of *Fantastic Adventures* or *Amazing*. You also state that the stories that you are printing in your three magazines are superior to those you printed in the era of pulps. I think that all of the stories in *Dream World*, and some of the stories in *Fantastic* and *Amazing* are simply vehicles for sex to sell the magazine, though every so often you print some good stories.

Les Gerber is a good friend of mine, and he tells me that he's writing a letter to ye ed. re: Julie Pass, but I would like to stick my two cents in. First off Les didn't say that fans are lazy, he said in effect that your magazines have anemic letter columns. The letters are cut, the type is large, and you have such darned short replies. Also there is too much formality in the letters.

Now to the stories: "The Vengeance of Kyvor"—interesting, with the exact same plots and counterplots that E. R. Burroughs made famous. "A Night in Benny's Bar"—highly unoriginal, same overall plot as "The Compleat Werewolf," by Anthony Boucher, the "Gavagans Bar" stories by Pratt and deCamp, and "Tales From the White Hart" by Arthur C. Clarke. "Graygortch"—terrific, print more like it. My applauds to Don Wilcox. The remainder of the stories were average.

Finlay's illustration for "The Vengeance of Kyvor" was terrific.

Andrew Reiss
741 Westminster Road
Brooklyn 30, New York

• *Speaking of those great old issues of* Amazing *and* Fantastic Adventures*—you'll no doubt remember the great illustrations of Henry Sharp in those days. Henry went on to bigger things—into commercial art where he's regarded as one of the best. Well, the other day Henry wandered in with a nostalgic look in his eye and said, "Look, how about letting me do some* Amazing *and* Fantastic *illos?" We did a double take and said, "Gad, man! You're busy with thousand-dollar commercial displays. How can you afford magazine illustration?" Henry shrugged, "I can't afford it, but a guy's got to have some fun once in a while." So he started out by illustrating "Cosmic Kill," the two-part* Fantastic *serial. And there will be more Henry Sharp illos in future issues—as only Henry can do them.*

Dear Ed:

I have just finished the March issue of *Fantastic* and I must say that I was delighted by the overall high quality of your stories. It's the first issue of *Fantastic* that I can recall reading but you can certainly bet that it won't be the last. I especially liked "Citadel of Darkness" and "The Goddess of World 21" and might I say thanks for letting a couple of females into the science-fiction world. You'd think that all women were left on Earth, forgotten, when the spaceships first started climbing into outer space.

If there are any fellow *Fantastic* enthusiasts who would like to correspond with me, I'd like to hear from them.

Mrs. Lucky Rardin
P.O. Box 342
Oak View, Calif.

• *As you've no doubt noticed in both* Amazing *and* Fantastic, *we feel women are here to stay and that they'll be very much a part of our world of the future.*

Dear Editor:

Thanks for the turn. I need it to clear up a misunderstanding. I did not say that fans were lazy. I know that they aren't. I'm a fan and I'm not lazy. My statement ran (as published): "About the letters: What's the matter with letter writers nowadays—too lazy?"

That isn't all I said. I said that the letters were too short, which I thought was due to the lazy letter writers. I found, to my dismay, that letters printed in *Fantastic* are cut. My own letter was cut, thus making me say things I didn't mean to say.

Now that I have (I hope) cleared that up, and I offer my apologies to any fans I may have offended, including Mrs. Pass, I would like to go on to some other business. I have news for John Butterworth. He, Marty Fleischman and Linda Sutton were not the only teen-agers who had letters in the issue. I am thirteen, though when I wrote the letter I was only twelve.

Thank heavens for the Finlay illustrations. He's the best in the business.

Why all the barbs thrown at "My Robot"? I thought it was a darned good story.

What, a Murray Leinster story? Great, my favorite writer in *Fantastic*. Keep this up and I'll have to subscribe. I hope it's a real long story.

Leslie Gerber
201 Linden Boulevard
Brooklyn 26, N. Y.

• *At times, in order to get as many letters as possible into an issue, we cut a few lines out. But it is done very carefully and we never slice a reader off in the middle of an idea. In the future we're going to allot more space to letters so everybody —or almost everybody—can get in.*

Dear Editor:

I have seen many letters in magazines from people complaining about serials. Many of them say that they don't buy magazines with serials in them. By doing that they miss a lot of good stories.

I have a suggestion for all those who feel the same way. They should do what I do. When a magazine has a serial, I save all the copies until I have each installment and then I read the whole thing. I don't like to wait for a month in between each installment either but I also don't want to miss any of the stories.

I read all the s-f I can get my hands on and I refuse to miss any of it because the magazine contains a serial.

Alberta Leek
Oak Ridge, N. J.

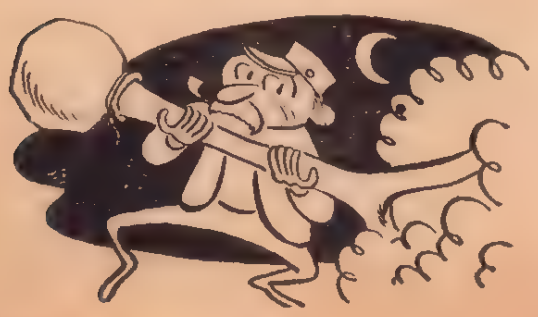
• *It seems that serials just don't belong in monthly magazines. A month is too long to wait in these fast-paced times to find out what happened. Yet our readers like long stories. We pondered the problem and as a result, we are bringing out a new magazine*—Amazing Stories Science Fiction Novels. *See the editorial in this issue for details. In this way we're going to make everybody happy. So clamp onto a copy of "20 Million Miles to Earth" when it hits the stands. And let us know how you liked it.*

"I'd like to leave you something to show my appreciation —a good book, perhaps?"

It Sounds Fantastic, But . . .

If you have occasion to mail snuff to Papua, don't. It's against Papuan postal regulations. If you want to send used razor blades to Iran, better give that up, too, because it is against Iranian law. Lebanon will under no circumstances accept parcels containing moldy cheese or preserves. So you can see that, one way or another, many curious obstacles are in the way of the world-wide use of the mails.

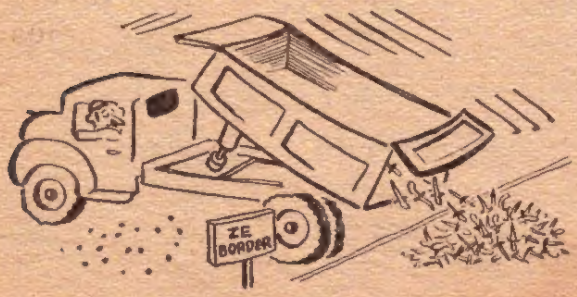
Let's consider some other cases: India will not accept Mexican jumping beans (sebastiana palmeri of the euphorbiacaea family), Britain, no advertisements of fortune tellers, and Ireland, no elm trees.



Then there is the matter of bees. Greenland will not admit bees under any circumstances. The new state of Israel, which still has an "open-door policy" when it comes to immigration, lets in bees, provided your package is accompanied by a health certificate from a "competent authority." Canada, which imports millions of baby bees each year, allows them to be sent only to towns served by railway express offices. Special handling charges are also applicable to honey bees in cages, but not to queen bees in cages, traveling alone. Cambodia doesn't object to bees, but will not admit shipments of fancy honey. Bulgaria, too, lets bees come in, provided the containers have small holes. And in the matter of holes, a U. S. Congressman recently introduced a bill making it mandatory for holes of bee containers to be smaller than the bees themselves.

More quirks in postal administrations: Bulgaria admits no silkworm eggs (except August 1 to December 1, and from February 1 to March 15); no playing cards of any kind, unless addressed to the government; no fish nets with meshes less than 1½ centimeters in diameter. Iran is dead set against "articles bearing the picture of the late Abdol-Baba."

Postal regulations are indeed mysterious. Now why should a country like Afghanistan discriminate against men's mufflers? But it does. It allows no "false mirrors" to come in either. Zanzibar bars "exhausted tea," and Nicaragua excludes police whistles and bullets made of iron or lead. Apparently ammunition made of any other metal is all right. And while we're discussing armaments, the Gold Coast prohibits the import of brass knuckles, as well as uniforms, "unless addressed to persons authorized to wear them." China bars flashlights in the shape of pistols; Colombia stops apparatus for throwing tear gas, and no daggers or stilettos may enter the Dominican Republic.



Now let us look at some more European prohibitions. Poland, quite understandably, wants no wallpaper dyed with colors based on arsenic. And, as the Polish postal authorities are so hepped up on keeping the lethal stuff out, they also put poisonous beans on the taboo list. Turkey isn't just being petty when it forbids the entry of flour adulterated with plaster, but why also ban molasses and "glasses magnifying more than eight times, unless ordered by the government"?

Yugoslavia, even before it turned Communist, would not receive playing cards made of metal in the mails, and The Netherlands object violently to gooseberry bushes. Eire doesn't allow hay, straw, or any article made of straw to come in.

So, even if a good son of Erin while abroad makes hay while the sun shines, he can't send it home! For some quite incomprehensible reason, no Eau de Cologne may be mailed from the Soviet Union to Basutoland in Africa. Denmark is up in arms against shoes made in part from paper pasteboard. French postal officials will keep out all funeral urns and the Federal Republic of Germany prohibits stenographic notes, as well as illegible writings or incomprehensible designs.

—PAUL STEINER

We note, too, that South Africa wants no "western," "detective," "confession" or "comic"-type magazines, and is also against the import of all back number magazines. Iraq bars "rubber pacifiers for the amusement of babies," Barbados all live animals, Bulgaria colored coffee, black pepper, as well as forks, knives and spoons containing more than 1 per cent of lead. Sure makes eating there difficult, doesn't it? But with the Reds in control, they probably haven't got too much to eat there, anyway.

Columbia is trying to keep out "machines for making money," Cambodia "unverified thermometers," Australia doesn't want horns and hoofs, except those forming part of hunting trophies.

As things stand now, no sea salt may be sent to Somaliland, unless addressed to the Minister of Finance. It is hard to comprehend why a big country like Argentina should object to washcloths or sealing wax, but both are on the verboten list. Bolivia, apparently borrowing a leaf from Eire, specifically prohibits trees in baskets, and Mexico wants absolutely no books relating to magic. The Soudan wants no leeches or silkworms, unless addressed to a certain laboratory at Khartoum.

We wish we could end on a more hopeful note, but the prohibitions go on and on. So until there is a change, be sure not to send celluloid earrings to Afghanistan, nor ladies' collars, nor dyes, unless they are okay for dying woolen carpets. And, above all, don't mail rubber balloons to Iraq, or musical instruments to the Tonga Islands, and, please, don't forget about that "no snuff to Papua" or this whole recitation will have been in vain.

ANSWERS TO AROUND-THE-WORLD QUIZ

1—Bosporus; 2—Red Sea; 3—Salem; 4—Albania; 5—San Marino; 6—Caspian Sea; 7—Buenos Aires; 8—Illinois; 9—Aconcagua; 10—Midway; 11—Pakistan; 12—Sicily; 13—Yellow Sea; 14—Afghanistan; 15—Marianas; 16—Niger; 17—Antarctic; 18—Iraq; 19—England; 20—Equator.

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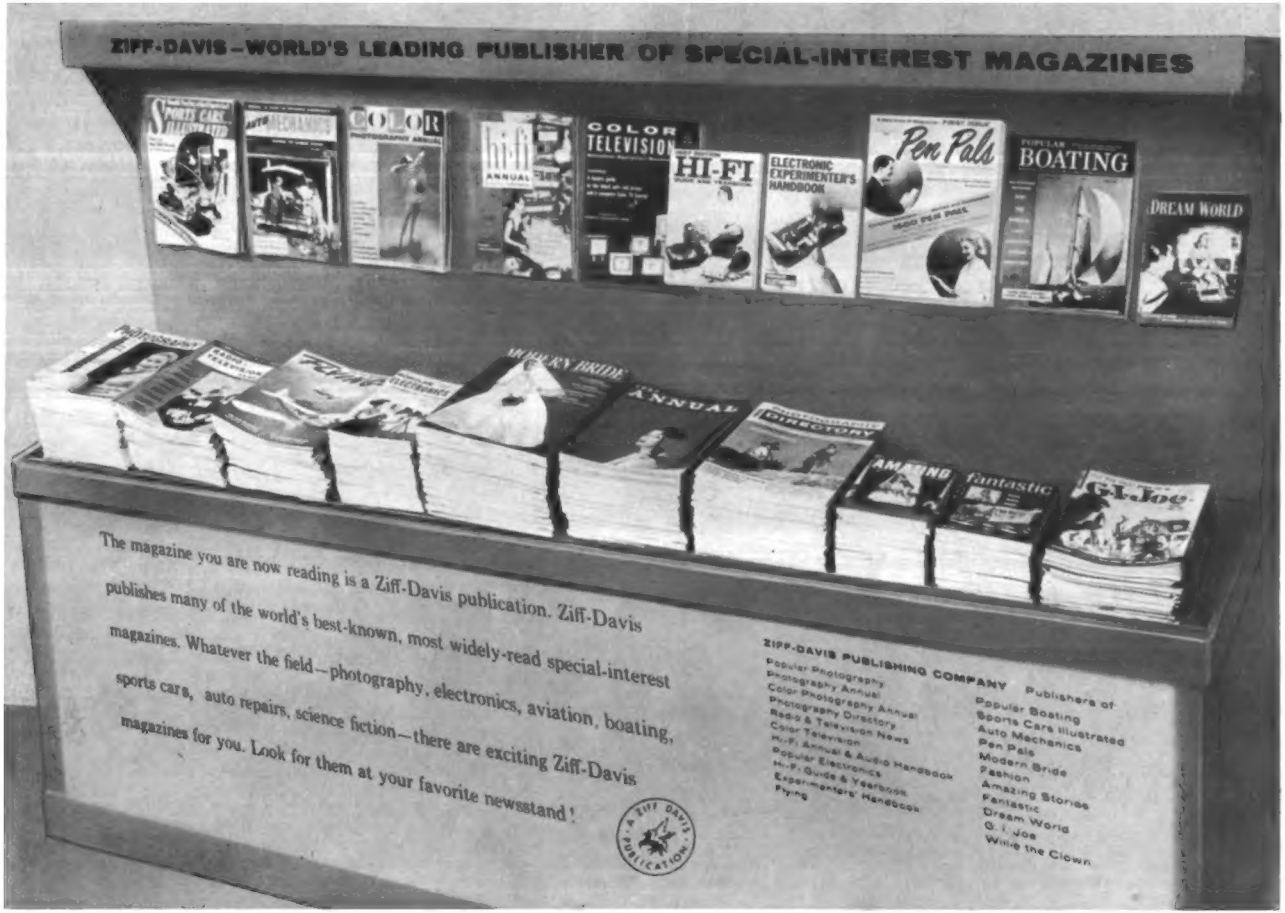
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